IF SEX IS YOUR WORK...

REFLECTIONS ON COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH IN THAILAND

by

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Abstract:

This thesis is a discussion of collaborative research methodologies devised for undertaking research within an organizational context with sex workers in Thailand's northern city of Chiangmai. It is a discussion of how the strategies were derived, the context they were derived for and how they played themselves out, "on the ground."

It provides an overview of the literature on the commercial sex industry in Thailand and a more detailed account of the current situation in Chiangmai. It also provides details about how the collaborative partner in this research, a Thai non-governmental organization called EMPOWER, seeks to work within this context.

The main discussion in the thesis revolves around how the issues of voice, consent and power melded together to act as a brake on the research process. It also highlights the importance of these issues in terms of undertaking research with women in this setting. Within this context, considerations for collaborative research projects with sex workers are outlined, the tensions between research and activism and elicited and how the issues of consent, voice and power played themselves out on the ground, is discussed.

Rather than simply criticizing the process of speaking about "others" and working collaboratively, suggestions for possible future projects are offered as a base from which to move forward.

It is my hope that this document will add to the expanding literature on women's experience of doing research in the field and their considerations in doing research on not only an academic level but also on an emotive level, in order that the research process can be better understood as well as more considerate of it's "subjects."

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In Thailand, special thanks are due to the women of EMPOWER who helped me through the initial struggle of identifying the research project most useful to EMPOWER and have continually lent assistance to me with drafts of the thesis, ideas and encouragement. Liz Cameron and Jackie Pollack were instrumental to the completion of this thesis, but thanks must also be extended to Jitlada Rattanaporn, Lawan Biathaisong and others who shall remain nameless.

I have enjoyed the support and encouragement of friends and colleagues in three distinct locations during the research and writing of this thesis and to everyone who was a part, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation.

Foreward:

Consent:

The content of this thesis has been approved by the staff of the EMPOWER Chiangmai office. All drafts have been presented to them for feedback and approval. However, the opinions within this thesis are the researcher's alone. Written consent for all stories of women included in this thesis, both staff and participants in the EMPOWER project has been obtained by the researcher in advance of submission of this thesis.

Thai Language in the Text:

Words in the text that are in the Thai language have been romanized and appear in italics. While this has not been an ideal way of representing the Thai language, it follows the example of other writers and researchers who incorporate Thai language into their texts. Please also note that Thai researchers have been referenced using their first names, following their referencing tradition.

Introduction:

In what could perhaps be considered a simplification of Gayatri Spivak's (1988) nuanced and detailed critique of the subaltern studies project, she concluded that the subaltern cannot "speak" through the texts created by this group of academics. She argues that their attempt to return agency to those dispossessed by history is noble, but the imposed of silence of that history forces the subject to be constituted only through the positions that have been "permitted" in such texts.

Spivak is not the first academic to make the accusation that academic texts are not sufficiently addressing the lived diversity and the individuality of the "subject." Her sentiment has been echoed by many other feminist writers who, through their research in the field, have attempted to let their "subjects," the "subaltern" - women, speak, but have found that issues of power and position intervene. Daphne Patai relates,

> "In the end, even "feminist" research too easily tends to reproduce the very inequalities and hierarchies it seeks to reveal and transform. The researcher departs with the data, and the researched stay behind, no better off than before. The common observations that "they" got something out of it too - the opportunity to tell their stories, the entry into history, the recuperation of their own memories, perhaps the chance to exercise some editorial control over its products etc... even when perfectly accurate, do not challenge the inequalities on which the entire process rests" (Patai 1991:149).

Judith Stacey reaffirms this opinion,

> "...the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants" (Stacey 1988:23).

I planned a thesis that would examine these conclusions that the subaltern cannot speak. While I did not propose to solve the problem, I asked: is the solution then to abandon the attempts to allow the "subjects" to speak? Is the solution to discontinue research and knowledge sharing because the path is fraught with challenging and potentially dangerous issues of power, gender, ethnicity and politics? I asked whether the idea of research which attempts to bring out women's voices is impossible, because the author inevitably subjugates their voice? Is it too destructive and disempowering to assume that research cannot take this form? And from the platform which these questions created, I tried to build a way, a strategy, and a method to try out on the ground.

Considering Women and Geography:

Within the field of geography, the quantity of research that focuses specifically on women has grown dramatically. Increasingly, much geographic research attempts to consider the impacts of the particular research topic on gender (as well as other variables).

When feminist geographers first began presenting their research, the emphasis focussed on illustrating the difference that gender could make to analysis. Research focussed on, but was not limited to, women's use of space and conception of place in the urban landscapes and

suburban areas of "developed" countries, discussion of women's work and leisure time, and geographic representations of women's social, economic and cultural place in society. At the same time, research which focussed on women from "less developed countries" looked at many of the same issues, but also had a strong emphasis on development, migration, and economic exploitation evolving from changing social and economic conditions in those countries (See Boserup 1970, Momsen 1987 and 1991 and Momsen and Kinniard (1993)).

During this early period (the 1970's and early 1980's) in feminist geographical research, it would seem that much of the importance was placed on getting the research done. This entailed the painstaking processes of getting it funded, accepted by committees and accepted by colleagues.[1]

Having established a foothold in the research process, many feminist geographers have returned to re-evaluate the work that they have undertaken. In the past few years, they have placed increasing scrutiny on the methods of doing research and the issue of power inherent in research. They have also considered the writings emanating from anthropology concerning reflexivity and constructions of the "subject" and "object" in research. Many feminist geographers have been on the forefront of helping to change research methods within the field of geography by incorporating what have been traditionally anthropological methodologies as well as those which have emerged from the field of women's studies. These methods include

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[1] See G. Rose 1993 for an excellent description of early stages of considering gender within the framework of geography as a discipline.

using the technique of ethnography within geography, looking closely at how representations of women have been constructed, considering research as a process of collaboration, and generally trying to construct research in such a way that is less exploitive, more representative and less homogenizing of women's diverse experiences (for recent examples of the feminism and method discussion within the discipline see Dyck 1993, Eyles 1993, Katz 1994, Moss 1993, Nast 1994, D. Rose 1993, and Staheli and Lawson 1994).

It was in this context that I returned to the academic fold to complete a Master's Degree after a one and a half year stay in Thailand's northern city of Chiangmai, which included a six month volunteer experience with a Thai non-governmental organization (NGO) that works with sex workers. Based on this experience, I became very interested in employing these new research techniques to undertake research about some aspect of the commercial sex industry in Chiangmai. I was particularly interested in constructing a project which aimed to work collaboratively with women in the industry and the NGO which would serve to "answer" some of the representations of sex workers, using their voices. I was also interested in ensuring that the project would be one that would be useful to the NGO in terms of research (i.e., a project that delved more deeply and systematically into an area of interest or importance to them) and coincided with the women's interests.

This was no small undertaking.

In Chapter one, I will discuss the literature and thinking that led to the construction of the specific research strategies that were to be employed in this research. I consider specifically other women researchers' experiences in conducting research with women and how these fit into the context of the research I planned to undertake.

In Chapter two, I spend some time outlining the context in which this research was to be undertaken. I consider not only the historical/economic/social context of commercial sex work in Thailand, but also try to inter-link this with the larger situation and position of women in Thailand in general. Because this is content enough for a Master's thesis in itself, I point to many areas in which future research could be fruitfully undertaken. With this context in place, I then narrow the focus in Chapter three to look specifically at the commercial sex industry in Chiangmai to provide background and further understanding of how the research strategies were constructed. I also discuss how the NGO with whom the research was conducted functions in this context.

In Chapter four I begin to analyze why even the careful consideration I had taken to construct what I considered to be appropriate and flexible research strategies was not enough to ensure the success of the project. I discuss not only the logistical problems that I encountered, but also the problems inherent in the research strategy, which revealed themselves in the field. These issues are grouped, under the headings of consent, voice and power. Chapter four is also a discussion of how the strategy employed actually acted as the brake to stop and reframe the process of the research and the importance of this mechanism.

In Chapter five, I offer some conclusions and some thoughts on the nature of research such as this to offer a future base from which to construct similar research projects.

The following thesis is a progression, from the somewhat sanitized, certainly idealistic and sometimes disparaging halls of academia - where I had the luxury of a year's thought and a year's writing - "to the ground." This was ground with which I was familiar, yet contexted differently - as a researcher. It is also a progression from a research design, to actual people, individuals with names, living their lives in the midst of my academic posturing.

It is my hope that this document will add to the expanding literature on women's experience of doing research in the field and their considerations in doing research on not only an academic level but also on an emotive level, in order that the research process can be better understood as well as more considerate of it's "subjects."

Chapter One: Strategies

The concept of this research was primarily influenced by academics who undertook their research "on the ground," meaning that field work and the analyses of their fieldwork was one component of their research process. It was also strongly influenced by the words of a number of academics, who after writing their original research piece, took time to return to their piece and reflect on the process of creating it. While this is not to say that the methodology was not influenced by philosophers, whose thoughts and words have challenged and changed the way in which people have conceptualized both culture and research, these discussions provided context without the implementative arm necessary for comparison in the construction of these strategies.

Perhaps the largest influence on the formulation of how the research would be conducted were the words of Daphne Patai and Judith Stacey, whose discussion of the research process gave me insight and a measure of understanding about how a research episode can play itself out. Their experience led me to think and re-think how research strategies could be constructed to avoid the issues and concerns they had run up against. Some of their concerns and conclusions seemed insurmountable;

> "... fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship is inescapable." (Stacey 1988:23)

> "...is it possible - not in theory, but in the actual conditions of the real world today - to write about the oppressed without becoming one of the oppressors?" (Patai 1991:139)

But, like Stacey and Patai, I also had a strong feeling that there is a wealth of information in the minds and experiences of women which will never be known unless we move away from such negative standpoints and continue to "construct" rather than "deconstruct," to suggest caution and try rather than to revert inward in the name of political correctness. However, within the effort to construct, a sensitivity to the nuances of power, position, ethnicity and gender must be included.

In my search for positive models, I found the ideas of Linda Alcoff (1991) very useful. She argues that by refusing to speak for others, we are avoiding responsibility and accountability. Speech must be held accountable, we must know why we are speaking and how it will affect those we speak for. We must be open to criticism resulting from our speech, and most importantly we must make the effort ourselves as writers and representors, to trace the effects of our speech. But we *must* speak. As Alcoff suggests, it is much easier to retreat. She further instructs;

> "...anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved." (Alcoff 1991:24)

One way of preparing to trace speech in such a manner is to plan through strategies of research to ensure that they incorporate "signal points" which allow resistance and concerns about the research to come through and be addressed before the project is complete. By carefully mapping not only the strategy of the research method, but also how the trajectories

of the final project may arc, I hoped to open the path to knowledge-sharing.

Constructing research strategies in an historically specific context and knowing this context well is another way a researcher can plan to trace the possible impacts of a project. By carefully considering this context (which is outlined in more detail in Chapters two and three), I believed that I had a good understanding of how the project would proceed, and although I did not know how it would end, the way in which the research was to be done would allow for the process of tracing and re-tracing the trajectories of speech.

This chapter then is a discussion of the research strategies I developed when contemplating undertaking research with women in Northern Thailand who work in the commercial sex industry. The strategies I devised for this thesis were at once a place to work from and a place to problematize the working structure of the research project. In this respect, they were less a strict framework than a loose web of ideas, with a mobility essential in representing a lived world, where any rigidity would prove to be their undoing. They provisionally represented a work in progress (see Clifford 1992). They reflected the flexibility of the research goal (in as far as its specific topic) and focused on how to undertake the process of gathering information and (re)present it in a manner which reduces the violence of discourse.

Motivations:

All research is born of a desire - a desire to know, to understand, to assist or perhaps to change. My research agenda was no different. It was sparked by sixth months of volunteer work in Chiangmai with a group called EMPOWER (Education Means Power for Women Engaged in Recreation). EMPOWER was formed in 1984 by Chantawipa Apisuk who was angered by the manipulation of Thai women involved in the commercial sex industry, in Bangkok's infamous Patpong district.[1] Today EMPOWER has an additional office in Bangkok's Soi Cowboy and an office in Chiangmai city which is located in the northern part of the country. Although the Bangkok offices necessarily focus their attention on only one small portion of the city's commercial sex industry (those located in and around Patpong and Soi Cowboy). EMPOWER's Chiangmai office, maintains contact with as many establishments as it can. It deals not only with women who work in bars which cater to foreign men, but also with women who work in "Kara-O.K.s", coffee shops, massage parlors and brothels which have a predominantly Thai clientele. The purpose of both the Bangkok

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[1] Darunee and Pandey (1991) provide this brief overview of the Patpong district, "Nai Udom Patpong was wealthy Chinese merchant who inherited a piece of land, less than half a square kilometer in size. The plot, located in the middle of Bangkok [and in one of the biggest business districts today] between Silom and Suriwong roads, cuts across three lanes. In the 1960's the area was occupied by foreign corporations, airlines and restaurants. During the Vietnam war, the area became a centre for "Rest and Recreation" of American GI's. In the late 1970s once the war was over, bars and nightclubs at other military bases of the country... were closed down and those girls [sic] started pouring into Patpong. With the booming of "sex tourism," the place became a popular "sin street" or red light zone. There are about 200 bars in which 4,000 girls [sic] work on a typical night." (Darunee and Pandey 1991:129)

and Chiangmai programs is the same; to empower women to make their own choices and decisions in their work.[2]

Working with this group I witnessed the injustices and outright paradoxes of the situations that sex workers endure. Although "prostitution" is officially illegal in Thailand, government practices operate along the fine line between cooperation and coercion. At times, they act in a benevolent 'big brother' role, distributing condoms and offering information about AIDS. At other times, exercising their more coercive demeanor, they send crime suppression unit police in to arrest women working as "prostitutes." These alternating government attitudes, fluctuating between cooperation and coercion are then promulgated by the media. Continuing the representations of the women that the government supports, the media exhibits women as victims, "children" unable to make decisions regarding their own future.[3] These children must be educated and disciplined so the society can "develop." The government adopts both the role of teacher and disciplinarian, vacillating wildly in their decision-making process, first aiding then jailing. In either situation, the women themselves are expected to remain passive, "docile" bodies. They are used, bought, sold, discussed, "educated," beaten, jailed and ignored

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[2] Darunee and Pandey (1991) list the objectives as;
1) To protect bar girls' [sic] rights,
2) To rebuild their sense of dignity and self-pride by finding ways to regain control of their lives,
3) To encourage them to build a base for their next step in life.
4) To provide information on health care and legal rights (Darunee and Pandey 1991:131).

[3] There is also a conspicuous absence of reporting about the customers - men. Although "prostitution" is illegal, never in Thailand's history has a man been prosecuted for soliciting a woman.

as objects.

My work with EMPOWER informed me that the women involved in the commercial sex industry are *none* of these things, despite what they endure and the textual representations already in place.[4] By using the opportunity to do research as a tool to (re)construct women as having the power and the intellect I know them to have, I hoped this thesis would serve in some small way to displace the government's and the media's misrepresentations in an attempt to de-centralize their hegemonic versions of "truth."

It was hoped that this research could then move towards rectifying the distortion of representations which reinforce the subjugation of women. I drew from the ideas of Maria Mies (1983) when she suggested,

> "Research... must be brought to serve the interests of dominated, exploited and oppressed groups, particularly women" (Mies 1983:123),

and

> "must be accompanied by the study of women's individual and social history... The appropriation[5] of women's history can be promoted by feminist scholars who can inspire and help other women to document their campaigns and struggles. They can help them to analyze these struggles so that they can learn from past mistakes and successes and, in the long run, may become able to move from spontaneous activism to long-term strategies" (Mies 1983:127).

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[4] See Steven Erlanger (1991), Walden (1992), Promporm (1991), Moreau (1992) Robinson (1993), "Thailand: The Sex Industry..." **Far Eastern Economic Review** 146(44):44 and "Sex for Sale," **Time Magazine** 21 June 1993 to name but a few such misrepresentations.

[5] By the term "appropriation," Mies refers to women making history their own, to their becoming "subjects."

In this respect research becomes a tool for understanding and change. It attempts to construct a positive future, and at the same time trace its effects.

In the strategies outlined below, I attempt to tie experiential (emotive) knowledge into the mobile web of ideas which, as a finished product I hoped would represent a moment in the women's lives.

STRATEGIES: Collaboration / Interviewing

Collaboration:

A main tenet of the research strategy was to collaborate directly with the women, within the institutional context of EMPOWER. By working directly with the women involved in the commercial sex industry this research hoped to ensure their involvement in every level of the research project from the initial decision on the specific topic to the final assessment.

Working directly with the women, collaborating with them, follows from the ideas of Mies (1983). Her outline of a methodology for feminist research calls for "conscientization" which she draws from Paulo Friere's (1970) concept of "conscientizaçao." She says,

> "The decisive characteristic of the approach is that the study of an oppressive reality is not carried out by experts but by the objects of oppression. People who before were objects of research become subjects of their own research and action." (Mies 1983:126)

Mies' use of the plural here also reflects that this type of collaboration refers to a group process. It shows the necessity for a more time consuming but more equitable collective decision making process. I felt that a process of collaboration also afforded women a collective security in that they could have others to talk to about the research, including their feelings, concerns and ideas about it. In this sense the project was meant to be one of group participation, even if there were times when information was shared individually with the researcher or one to one between the participants.

This strategy of collaboration also modelled Claudia Salazar's (1991) thoughts on how academics could construct a more politically effective counter-hegemonic critique of colonialist academic practices by,

> "in addition to textual analysis, to involve ourselves (directly) in the struggles of those on the other side of the international division of labor." (Salazar 1991:102).

Working directly with and through the NGO was another main tenet of the idea of collaboration. I expected them to be both participant and monitor of the process. I expected women to present issues and concerns about the process of the research to them, if for some reason they could not speak to me, as an added measure to ensure that women had an outlet if they were not satisfied with the way things were progressing.

In the initial stages of the research, I planned to have meetings with both the women who coordinate the work of the NGO and the women who participate in its programs in order to collectively establish an understanding of how the research could be done. The purpose of

this was to establish the ideas the women were interested in discussing for the research, outline the parameters for the research and ensure that everyone had a mutual understanding of how things were to proceed.

Key to this methodology was that the research piece that we would construct together was under their control. They could stop the process at anytime they felt it was not in their control, or if they disagreed with the way it was progressing. It is perhaps unusual that a mechanism by which the participants could trigger a change in or even an end to the research in its entirety be included from the outset of a project. Usually the research process relies on individuals to a greater extent that this, but I felt that it was the best way that the process of collaboration on the project could be maintained. I expected to play the role of facilitator, keeping interest in the research going and seeing it to the agreed completion.

Interviewing:

At the outset, the main strategy for information gathering was to follow the form of interviews. Exactly how the interviewing would take place was a matter for discussion. Would I conduct the interviews with women one on one, in groups or in workshops at EMPOWER? Would EMPOWER staff members conduct the interviews in any of the above listed ways, or would the women themselves conduct the interviews? I intended to have these questions answered by the group.

By using a strategy which employs interviews to elicit information, I was hoping to recognize and celebrate the oral nature of women's everyday communication. This strategy also takes into consideration barriers presented by education (not all women are comfortable with their writing skills) and native language. I felt it was an infinitely more flexible and useful tool than an instrument such as a survey which fits the diversity and color of women's lives into small, neat, easily quantified, but inevitably dry boxes. But interviewing is also a tool which is difficult to convert into textual form, and has its own issues and concerns with power.

I felt that interviewing, which as a methodology itself calls for the use of voice, could be used to elicit the voice of women which could be amplified to counter the often heard voice of the government and media. These voices could then be used to deconstruct the representation of sex workers as victims and allow individuals with strengths and ideas to come through.

However, there are issues surrounding the notion of power which appear in the interviewing process. These issues crystallize for me in the idea, succinctly stated by Foucault that,

> "we should abandon the whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands, its interests... We should admit rather that power produces knowledge; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault 1979:27).

Mies (1983) tries to address the issue of how power works to construct knowledge in her strategies for feminist research by suggesting that the researcher must "demand a systemic

view from below," which attempts to diffuse the hierarchical research situations where "an acute distrust in the 'research objects' [develops and] they feel that they are being interrogated" (Mies 1983:123). This statement assumes that the researcher would undertake the interviewing process, but also offered guidelines to someone who saw their position more as a facilitator. Mies' view also suggests ways in which Alcoff's (1991) ideas can be implemented, by continually returning questions raised by the women themselves, to trace and retrace the trains of thought produced by the group.

Working collaboratively with the women and EMPOWER I thought might result in some ambiguity in what the women perceive to be 'for the record' and 'not for the record.' Accordingly, it was part of the research strategy from the start that any information that was to be used in the final thesis be discussed with the women and if in the form of a transcript record, returned to the women for their approval, ensuring that they have the opportunity to be represented in the way that they wish and on the issues that they choose. In this respect they gain agency and I would be the one who must change my ideas to fit their expectations. This follows the ideas of many feminist researchers who return the interviews and or fieldnotes to the women and ask for their corrections and deletions. This can be both time consuming (Shostak 1989) and disappointing (Stacey 1988), but ensures that trust is respected.

Some thoughts about Analysis:

These were the broad research strategies which I envisioned implementing with a group of women at EMPOWER. While they were not meant to be final in any way, the issue of how the final analysis could be presented was problematic from the beginning.

How to collate the information gathered and share it with the women in a period of research which was originally intended to last six months was one issue. Although most interviewers undertake a "coding" process at one time or another, I believe that this serves to homogenize the very diverse lives of the women involved in the study. Chandra Mohanty (1991a), Maria Mies (1983) and many others have tried to show the relational nature of peoples' lives, in their critique of methodologies which homogenize and subjugate difference. Where do peoples' lives go once placed into little boxes?

For example, Pasuk Phongpaichit (1982) undertook a survey of women who worked in massage parlors in Bangkok. Fifty women were interviewed and their responses lumped together in interesting tables which provide some insight into the women's working conditions. However, the women themselves are conspicuously absent from this study, until the final pages when their stories are paraphrased for them. The reader is left thinking that these women lack the intellect to accurately represent themselves, so it must be done for them.[6] Their own decision making processes and their own questions are subjugated to the

[6] Alison Murray (1991) also slides into this form of representation in her discussion of street vendors and prostitutes in Jakarta, Indonesia. Effectively, her paraphrasing of women's lives serves to detract from her otherwise interesting study.

researchers interviewing agenda. Although coding and breaking down interview data can be useful for constructing heuristic analytical categories, in the end, such a methodology subjugates difference.

Instead, I hoped to work together with the women to decide the final format. Although I realized that this would be difficult, I hoped that the context of what was to be built in the research process would carry it through. I also hoped to involve the EMPOWER staff in the final rendition of the thesis to garner their comments and feedback, to ensure that I had also presented a fair representation of their work.

This led me to another consideration of how to use the information gathered and wind it into an interpretation which seeks to do the things I have outlined. Although I was open to how the final analysis would take shape, my ideas about it were influenced by a number of writers. In this respect, the concepts offered by Chandra Mohanty provided insight,

> "I want to suggest that it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while at the same time insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and collectives and their engagement in "daily life." (Mohanty 1991a:13)

Mohanty recognizes, as do many feminist writers, that analysis cannot take place by categorizing women into different segments in their life and looking at them separately. How do we isolate our economic selves from our selves as women? Are the two not implied at the same time? This dynamic, interrelated form of analysis also follows from the ideas of

feminist writers who are asked to have allegiances based on their gender, or ethnicity, or class (Trinh 1989). They object to the creation of themselves as discrete and separable, and I agree with this position. Instead, in considering the information for analysis, certain factors may appear more prominent, but do not speak for the whole. Women's lives can not be captured textually with such ease. Trinh Minh-ha is especially fierce in her writings about this issue,

> "you can no doubt capture, tame and appropriate it to yourself, for language as a form of knowing will always provide you with Your other." (Trinh 1989:53)
>
> "power therefore never dies out : tracked, pursued, worn out, or driven away here it will always reappear there where I expect it least. And language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation, being at the same time the locus of power and unconscious servility. (Trinh 1989:52)

Feminists wish to use fluid, dynamic and relational forms of analysis in order to break from the discourse which forces us into patriarchal molds or essentializes us. I too hoped to move towards constructing a discourse such as this, which would act to resolve some of the problems revolving around power, cultural background and understanding in undertaking cross-cultural research.

This research strategy only attempts to create an awareness of these issues and see how they play themselves out "on the ground." It is difficult to conceptualize "life" as it is lived into text or a research strategy and give it the subtle attention it demands. Life is so un-analytical in the moment. To some questions there are no "answers" but only possibilities. By recognizing them I hoped to keep the sensitization process alive.

I constructed these strategies in an open ended way in order to fit with the objectives of EMPOWER, which as their name implies strives to empower women who work in the commercial sex industry. I hoped that the open nature of the research would encourage women to have greater confidence in their voice and illustrate to them that people are interested in their opinions and thoughts as individuals. I also hoped that their involvement in this research project would encourage them to see themselves as a group and work together as a group. I thought that this might lead to the recognition that collective power can also be useful for fighting life's battles.

Conclusion:

With this mobile web of strategies supporting a loose research framework, I returned to Chiangmai. I expected a healthy dose of skepticism from both the women who work at EMPOWER and the women who use it's services. But a discussion of what I encountered is still premature. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, historical context of the research framework is also an essential component of the construction of both strategies and implementation of a research project. This necessitates that the focus changes slightly to delve into a discussion of the commercial sex industry in Thailand, which will build the context of the research situation.

Chapter II: The Commercial Sex Industry in Thailand

Before looking more closely at the historical development of the commercial sex industry in Thailand, a discussion of what this alludes to specifically should be undertaken to clarify the terms of reference. The term commercial sex industry omits reference to the words prostitute and prostitution, to which it may refer. But the meaning of these latter words has varied, placing emphasis on different aspects of practice over time.

The word "prostitute," as both a noun and a verb has a long history in the English language, having first appeared in the 16th century. As alluded to above, it has been redefined and reshaped according to different aspects of its practice. Jane Mills (1991), who has traced the history of the words prostitute and prostitution, begins by explicating their Latin roots;

> "The Latin *prostitutus, prostituta* the past participle of *prostituere*, meaning to expose publicly or to offer for sale, is formed on *pro*, in the sense of for or on behalf of, and *statuere*, meaning to set up or decree," (Mills 1991:194)

thus illustrating the connection with money often associated with prostitution.

Vern and Bonnie Bullough (1987) trace the ties to promiscuity of the word "prostitution" to Christian influences in Europe where they say;

> "Prostitution was defined by the patristic writers in terms of promiscuity and not in terms of accepting payment. Saint Jerome, for example defined a whore as a woman who was available for the lust of many men." (Bullough and Bullough 1987:68-69)

The Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1983) offers these definitions;

> Prostitute: 1: to offer indiscriminately for sexual intercourse esp. for money, a: a woman who engages in promiscuous sexual intercourse esp. for money : WHORE
>
> Prostitution: 1: the act or practice of indulging in promiscuous sexual relations esp. for money. 2: the state of being prostituted.

What Mills (1991) points out though is that;

> "The word *prostitute* invariably means female. Very occasionally in the mid-C17th it was used to denote a catamite, and since 1948 it has been applied to a man who undertakes male homosexual acts for payment, but he is usually referred to as a *male prostitute*. Thus, prostitute is one of the few words in the English language where the norm is female rather than male." (Mills 1991:199)

These definitions reflect the long social interest in controlling and limiting women's sexuality, which a topic which is discussed in detail by many other writers (Daly 1978, Ong 1987, Young 1990, Butler 1990).

The etymology of the Thai words which refer to women whose work is selling sex would provide an interesting research project in itself. "*Sophanee*" (prostitute), "*Phu Ying Tiaow*" (prostitute, slang), "(*Phu*) *Ying Borigaan*" (service woman), "*Phu Ying Haa Kin*" (woman looking for food), "*Phu Ying Khaay Tua*" (woman who sells her body), "*Phu Ying Khaa Brawenee*" (woman who sells sex), "*Phu Ying Acheep Phiset*" (woman with a special occupation) are examples of some of the more commonly used labels, but a whole set of even less euphemistic descriptions of women's bodies exist as well. The language is diverse and variable. Of course there are other classifications as well, such as child prostitute and male prostitute, but for the purposes of this discussion of the CSI in Chiangmai, the focus will

remain on the position of women (although the distinction between woman and girl may sometimes become indistinct).

Although the process of defining a word or a concept can in some instances amount to an attempt to capture and constrain the essence of the thing, reducing its dimensions to a form which words can envelop and possess (as Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989) has pointed out) the opposite can also be true. Feminists have sometimes turned language upon itself and taken possession of words which had previously been slurs and redefined them, shaping them for their own purposes. And sometimes new words have been created which strive to emphasize different aspects of a certain concept.

For the purposes of this work, the definitions of prostitute and prostitution provide little concrete assistance, as they have been tied to value laden judgements as illustrated above. To pin a word to the fluid, changing forms of sexual exchange for monetary remuneration and for goods in kind, within commercial sex enterprises and in private spaces anywhere in the world, is to provide it with a concreteness and form which does not exist.

Rather, when referring to a woman whose work is selling sex, I prefer to use the term sex worker, which redirects attention to the woman's labor, rather than associations with promiscuity often tied to the word prostitute. And almost inseparable from the term sex worker is the term commercial sex industry. By the Commercial Sex Industry (CSI), I refer to the myriad independent establishments, which if viewed in unison (a tricky endeavor) move

some distance towards grouping the places where sex can be bought or sold for remuneration, but also includes reference to their supporting structures, such as locations where sex is sold, management of sex enterprises, as well as entertainments and shops found nearby catering to the clients of commercial sex. This necessarily focusses attention on a wider perspective than individual women sex workers and serves to provide for them a context, rather than the facade of singularity. By referring to the CSI as an "industry," I am also trying to make transparent that although individual establishments may operate independently, that they are still linked to a larger community - as is any industry. And some aspects of that community are supportive (vendors, sales people, and sometimes customers) and some are exploitative (pimps, owners, police and sometimes customers).

A discussion of this commercial sex industry and exactly how it grew to fill the proportions of something that could be referred to as an industry, both historically and in a specific context (Chapter three) goes some way towards defining the position of the women with whom the research was to be undertaken and provides some context as to the constraints imposed on the research.

The Period of Absolute Monarchy

Prior to the Ayuthaya period (1351 -1767) in Thailand's history, the institution of commercial sex or sex for sale may well have been in practice, but no written record survives. The first mention of women whose work was selling sex occurs in the Law of Evidence which was promulgated in 1351 (C.E.). This document sets out the requirements for those persons

bearing witness in the courts of the time. "Prostitutes" are mentioned, because according to this law, they were forbidden from bearing testimony (Luang Suthivart 1976:200). It is believed that the number of women selling sex during this period of time were few in number. M. de la Loubère, who visited the Ayuthayan court in the late 17th century recorded the number of sex workers at this time as approximately 600 in number (de la Loubère 1693). It is interesting to note that the first record of sex workers is a negative one, a prohibition from offering testimony, and that although their numbers are referred to as "small" that they were significant enough to legislate against.

The above semantic discussion is a moot point in the description of women's work selling sex in this period, because most of the women providing sexual services were primarily slaves, sold in for the purpose or transferred there from other positions as slaves[1]. Men were permitted to sell their wives and children for the purposes of repaying debt or to promote their careers (by offering them to members of the aristocracy or the King) until 1868 when King Chulalongkorn discontinued this practice (Siriporn 1983). But women who were still slaves continued to be bought and sold until slavery was abolished in 1874[2].

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[1] This has clear resonances with today, which will be uncovered in the discussion of women's position in the commercial sex industry in Chiangmai.

[2]Sukanya Hantragul (1988) mentions that this edict by the King in 1874 was not strongly enforced until a law in 1905 abolishing slavery was established.

Turton (1979), in his treatise on Thai institutions of slavery relates,

> "A further aspect of female slavery is that of prostitution. Even in the 17th century, La Loubère (1969:85) refers to a titled official as 'that infamous fellow who buys Women and Maids to prostitute them...' and Hallett claims that 'the prostitutes are all slaves,' sold by their kinsmen (1890:452). Even when not sold directly into prostitution the relative lack of customary and legal protection for female slaves, especially non-redeemable, must have made them vulnerable to sexual exploitation" (Turton 1979:281).

The services of "slaves" performing sexual services during this period are believed to have been directed towards the men undertaking corvee labor for the King (Siriporn Skrobanek 1983). Conversely, men of the aristocracy (*Sakdina*) were not thought to have patronized these women , because they had numerous wives and/or concubines in their own homes. This practice of polygamy was outlined in the first laws on the family, (*Kotmaay Laksana Pua Mia*) brought into force in 1361. Essentially these laws described the conditions under which women could be married, divorced, punished, bought and sold. Although polygamy was already commonly accepted at this time, this particular set of laws clarified its practice by classifying wives into three major categories[3] (of which a man could have a number of each different type if he so chose). First was the *Mia Klang Muang* or the *Mia Luang* which means Major Wife. This wife was a wife married to a man with the understanding that she would be the principal wife (although it did not state in the law that a man could have only one). The second category was the *Mia Noi* which means minor wife. This wife was also married to a man with the consent of her parents with the understanding that she should

[3] There was also another class of wife known as *Mia Phrarajathan* which meant, wife given by the King. These wives held a higher rank that a *Mia Luang* and were awarded to men for their meritous service to the Kingdom (Luang Suthivart 1976).

occupy this lower position. The third category covered the *Mia Thasi* or slave wives, who did not need their parents consent to be married, but could be purchased for this purpose from their previous owner or family.[4] Obviously this categorization of wives positioned women differentially within the context of a conjugal relationship and assigned corresponding value to their (human) lives.

Although it would seem that sale of sex in this era was primarily for the purpose of providing sexually available women to men who were away from their homes for 3-6 months a year, a question arises as to whether members of the aristocracy also purchased sex. As the accumulation of *mia thasi* (slave wives) was seen to be a method of gaining merit and prestige, it holds that members of the aristocracy may as have frequented the brothels to find members to add to their harems.[5] Perhaps a more pertinent question here revolves around how establishments were run. Were women purchased and sold to provide profit for the owner (as La Loubère implies) or were there also establishments were independent women worked? Another question directly related to this would be, "why were women involved in selling sex?" Was it forced labor, a good economic option or none of these?

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[4] Upon giving birth to a child, a slave wife automatically attained the status of a minor wife. Whether or not she had born a child, on the death of her husband, she became a free woman (Luang Suthivart 1976).

[5] During this period there were also slave markets which were definitely a source for **mia thasi**. That sex workers may have formed another source of slave wives for the aristocracy is only a hypothesis whose verity is lost in the silences of history.

Semi-Colonial Influence and the Chinese Era

After the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855, which gave the British (and later other European nationalities) rights of extra-territoriality without the full power of colonial government, the economy of Thailand began to move away from a subsistence based, monarchical service oriented one to one based on wage labor and production of primary goods for export. In order to fill the gaps in available wage labor (the Thai's were still bound by corvee labor until 1874) the Europeans imported Chinese labor to work on the rice farms, plantations, mines and forestry projects coordinated by them. By 1919, there were an estimated 260,194 Chinese living in Thailand (21% female) and in 1929 there were an estimated 445,279 (29% female) (Siriporn 1983:32). As within the Ayuthayan period, these large numbers of men away from family were supposed to have created a demand for women selling sex.

At first, Chinese women were contracted to come and work as sex workers in Thailand. Some of the young girls were indentured to go without knowing what type of employment they were expected to perform[6] (Siriporn 1983). L.A Eng (1986) analyzes a similar phenomena among Chinese women immigrants to Malaysia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the abolition of slavery though, the numbers of freed slave women available for employment and channeled into the beginnings of the commercial sex "industry" increased

[6] This is a technique which Thai agents recruiting for the commercial sex industry have also employed to take women away from rural villages.

(Sukanya 1988). Why (as Sukanya asserts) freed slave women were seeing sex work as a viable job opportunity and why the demand had increased so much that freed slave women could be hired in numbers, is also unknown. More research could fruitfully be undertaken in this area.

During this period of time during the early Bangkok era, *Soi Samphaeng* (Samphaeng Lane), which functioned as both the immigrant center and the largest site of commercial sex in the capital, grew steadily. Siriporn (1983) indicates that by 1930, that 80% of the registered brothels were run by Chinese. It is interesting to note though, that brothel owners were already preferring to run their operations outside the control of the State. This figure recorded in the statistics may well reflect the stronger control the Thai's kept over the Chinese immigrant community than such a skewed distribution of owners by ethnicity. However, it would not be untrue to say that a majority of establishments in this period were operated by Chinese.

That commercial sex was becoming more institutionalized during this period can be seen from the advent of laws used to control its growth and perceived adverse side effects. In 1909, the first Venereal Disease Act was put into place. This law, according to Morris Fox, served to,

> "establish government control over prostitution through a system of licensing and regulation of houses and prostitutes. It set forth the conditions under which prostitution could be practiced. It also attempted to protect girls (sic) against slavery and undue exploitation, the public against nuisances and it tried to control venereal diseases." (Fox 1957:1, also see Exhibit A).

Although this appears to be a progressive, desirable law serving to protect women, its

protective measures were never enforced. Rather, it represents the first in a long line of laws that serve to focus on women's condition and regulation of that condition rather than men's role in the process.

What components were at work in the construction of demand for commercial sex by Thai men after the demise of corvee labor during this period remains unclear. Although there were a few registered brothels operating in Bangkok and catering primarily to Thai and Chinese clientele (Siriporn 1983), how demand was constructed has also been lost in the silences of history. Did men who were accustomed to having access to different women's bodies for 6 months a year simply go home and live lives contently with their wives? Or did they become immediately involved in the increased amount of wage labor available and continue to live away from home and carry on as before? Or did they create a demand for commercial sex closer to their own homes? This gap in the construction of demand creates questions which make it difficult to trace the growth of the commercial sex industry on an indigenous level.

Further into the 20th Century:

Increasing legalization of Thai society, and a wish by the aristocracy and bureaucrats to be viewed as more attuned to Western morality led to the abolition of polygamy in 1935. Some writers attribute this action as one factor which increased the demand for commercial sex. This may have been so for the middle and lower classes but Pasuk (1982) points out that even though polygamy was outlawed, that members of the elite continued acquiring *mia noi* and

concubines at the same rate.[7] She says that even though there was a political revolution (i.e. the over-throw of the monarchy and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy) that a real revolution of attitudes was slow in coming. She attributes this torpidity to the aspirations of the new bureaucrats and military leaders in power to have the same privileges afforded to their predecessors (Pasuk 1982:4). What is certain is that the process of accumulating sexually available women to improve prestige and position continued. As Sukanya (1988) points out though that other factors may also have played a role;

> " Culturally, Thai society still very much flatters men for their promiscuity and polygamy." (Sukanya 1988:117)

During World War II, Thailand was occupied by the Japanese and although their presence certainly had an impact on the CSI in the form of "comfort women," being forced to serve Japanese troops in Thailand, little research on this topic has been published. Links between the development of the CSI and this period of time could be further researched.

After World War II, urbanization and migration to urban areas in Thailand increased steadily. Because the shift from subsistence agricultural production to wage labor was becoming even more pronounced, a separation between the work place and the place where one lived also occurred (Demaine 1986). These factors are thought to have contributed to the increasing demand for commercial sex.

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[7] She also discusses how the institution of "beauty contests" introduced at this time became a way for the elite to choose their new concubines. Interestingly, now, in Vietnam a similar institution is being revived (See **The Nation** 11 October 1993).

In 1960, further laws restricting the sale of sex were put into place. It took the form of the "Anti-Prostitution" Law, which prohibited the sale of commercial sex.[8] This law was passed during the rule of a rather repressive military regime controlled by General Sarit, as a part of a general campaign to "clean up" Thailand's image. This law punishes the woman for her role in selling sex. Although there are provisions for prosecuting clients, pimps and procurers, they have rarely been enforced. And as time has shown, the only time the law is ever used to arrest women or owners of CSI establishments, is when there is some dispute over the protection money that every commercial sex enterprise has to pay (this corruption is even mentioned by a police officer in his thesis, (Kitti Serebutr 1973) and by Thephanom Muangman (1980) who had a police general write letters for him asking the brothel owners to cooperate with his research). The best estimates of how many women are involved in the commercial sex industry in any given place in Thailand most definitely lie in the secret files of police officers, because they collect "protection money" according to the number of women employed in a place (in addition to drinking and utilizing services free of charge at any time).

In 1966, the Entertainment Industry Act was also passed. This law outlined the conditions under which entertainment establishments could be licensed. This act was a de facto recognition that the numbers of places selling sex were getting beyond the government's ability to regulate or prohibit. Essentially, it gave license to places to sell sex under the guise of operating as massage parlors, tea houses, dance halls, bars and barber shops (while at the same time officially prohibiting it). This provided another kick-back point for government

[8] This law is still in effect today, although there have been numerous attempts to revise it.

officials issuing the licenses, which cost a great deal of money to acquire and then renew, although the official fee is fairly low (EMPOWER Bangkok Office:Personal Communication 1993). Both the 1960 and 1966 laws increased the regulation over women working in the sex industry and have worsened their position, because the owners take large percentages of their earnings (50-60%) to pay associated fees and at the same time ensure a profit for themselves. In practice, official prohibition of "prostitution" also means that women have no recourse to the law if they are abused, raped, or treated unfairly by clients, employers or even law enforcement officials, because they practice an illegal occupation.

During this period of time, due to the increasing migration to the cities (primarily Bangkok), and the commercialization of agriculture, families in the North and Northeastern parts of Thailand faced larger and larger debts (incurred by landlessness, an increased need for cash to add inputs such as fertilizer, increased seed, and compensation for failed crops, Anan 1984).[9] In the countryside, lack of access to formal borrowing institutions has meant that farmers and agriculturalists have to borrow from either the local shopkeeper, a loan shark, or increasingly, the agents looking for women to work in the sex industry. The rates of interest are phenomenal (often more than 100%).

Concomitantly, forms of urban, paid entertainment were increasing in number with the influx of workers into the cities. Movies and restaurants became more ubiquitous. Embree (1950)

[9] Hirsch (1989) also provides a detailed analysis of how this happened in one Central Thai village.

mentions the advent of taxi dance halls, and other accounts mention the Chinese tea houses and the increasing number of coffee shops. While some of these forms of entertainment were certainly beyond the means of laborers, like today, demand was probably created by the owners of these establishments who could provide the sexual labor of indebted women at reduced rates. In today's terms this means that buying a woman can cost the same amount of money as buying a beer, seeing a movie, or taking a tuk-tuk ride. By monopolizing the sexual double standard, this meant that buying sex was, and is, just another form of cheap entertainment.

The Vietnam War

Prior to and during the Vietnam War, the American presence in Thailand was very large.[10] The Americans constructed seven military airfields (mostly in the Eastern part of Thailand near the Cambodian border and in the Northeast bordering Laos) and had soldiers stationed on other bases in Thailand as well. In addition, beginning in 1966 American soldiers stationed in Vietnam were flown in for R+R (Rest and Relaxation) in Thailand on a regular basis. These soldiers with monthly paychecks far exceeding the monthly income of the Thais created a huge demand for entertainment industries, the largest being for sex.

Cynthia Enloe (1989) and Thanh - Dam Truong (1990) have both undertaken detailed

[10] See Gray (1990) for a brief synopsis of the involvement of Australian soldiers in Thailand and in the Vietnam conflict.

analyses of the effect that the military involvement in Vietnam had on both the nature of the commercial sex industry in the period of their presence and afterwards and how the demand for sex as a form of entertainment was created. They have examined how women became perceived and positioned in terms of the industry's massive growth. They both assert that after the American's withdrawal from Southeast Asia, that there was a short lag and then tourism took over to replace the loss of military-industrial income. However, Sukanya (1988:130) astutely observes that in the post-Vietnam period, that American GI patterns of recreation were also adopted by Thai men. This transfer was supported by the sexual double standard which allows that males can have permissive sexual relations, while women must remain faithful to one man. Sukanya reports,

> "There is no doubt that institutionalized prostitution existed in Thailand prior to the Chinese, the American GI and the more recent tourist. These newcomers did not corrupt a simple people, rather by introducing an additional demand, they extended the existing facilities" (Sukanya 1988:130).

There is no doubt, as Sukanya alludes to, that commercial sex during this era became a major industry. It became more visible, more commercial and certainly more extensive. Entertainment places cropped up surrounding all of the US military institutions in Thailand and grew phenomenally in both Bangkok (Patpong and New Petchburi Road) and in the seaside resort of Pattaya.

Tourism

After the Vietnam war, the Thai government was in a bind. The foreign exchange revenue they had received from the Americans, both in direct exchange for services and in money

spent by the GI's on R+R breaks was about to dry up. So they began to promote tourism, and more specifically sex tourism.[11] As arrival statistics of tourists show, their campaign portraying Thai women as submissive and faithful "mignons" worked, as approximately a 2:1 ratio of males to females came to see the wonders of the "Land of Smiles." In 1979, ISIS had already published a detailed account of how these promotion schemes were exploiting women and exposed how foreign men were arriving in droves to take advantage of "unliberated women."

The year 1980 was designated "Visit Thailand Year" and the push was still on to encourage foreign tourists to visit.[12] An example of the government's complicity with promoting tourism which focussed on the sexual labor of their female citizens is illustrated in the comments of Boonchu Rojanasathein, a former vice premier of Thailand and a well known international banker. He addressed these comments to a group of provincial governors,

> Within the next two years, we have a need of money. Therefore I ask all governors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces together with some forms of entertainment that some of you might consider disgusting and shameful because they are forms of sexual entertainment that attract tourists. Such forms of entertainment should not be prohibited if only because you are morally fastidious. Yet explicit obscenities that may lead to damaging moral consequences should be avoided within a reasonable limit. We must do this because we have to consider jobs that will be created for the people. (Matichon October 18 1980 quoted in Siriporn 1983:38).

The implications of this are obvious, as is the degree of government support for something that is officially illegal.

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[11] As previously mentioned, Truong (1990) has detailed this conversion in some detail.

[12] See O'Malley (1988) for a basic but solid history of how tourism and prostitution have grown together since the Vietnam War.

After a good deal of international criticism and media attention, the government toned down its campaign to promote erotic images of Thailand linked with sex tourism. However, the Thai government is still reluctant to put any real measures of control[13] on the foreign oriented commercial sex industry. Cohen (1988) illustrates this with his analysis of the government's silence on the AIDS issue in Thailand until 1987. He asserts that the government's unwillingness to move on the issue, even for the benefit of the population at large, lies in the fact they were fearful of the impact it would have on tourism which is seen as closely linked to the commercial sex industry.

Actually, by 1989, the sex ratio of tourist arrivals had not changed that much. Men comprised 65.95% of tourists to Thailand and women 34.05%. The only country that had more of its female than male citizens visit Thailand in 1989 was France. As the chart below illustrates, some of the sex ratios are very skewed indeed.

[13] Although I do not advocate the imposition of further measures of control which focus on women's role in the CSI, I do use it as a gauge to judge a government's particular interest in an issue.

Table I: Tourist Arrivals in Thailand in 1989,

Selected Countries by Gender

Country	Men	Women
The Netherlands	62.91%	37.09%
Switerland	60.47%	39.53%
U.K.	60.79%	39.21%
Japan	72.43%	27.57%
Malaysia	74.6%	25.4%
China	73.53%	26.47%

Source: Annual Statistical Report on Tourism in Thailand 1989 (Bangkok:TAT).

Although sex tourism is undoubtedly big business involving corporate interests, airlines and hotels (See Truong 1983, Cohen 1982) it is estimated that 80% of the commercial sex industry is actually geared towards internal consumption, with the majority of the customers being either Thai or of Sino-Thai descent. It is clear that Thai men's consumption of sex is substantial. Truong (1983) sees the high geographical and occupational mobility of Thai labor as being a possible factor contributing to men's use of the commercial sex industry, as men are living away from their partners, usually in urban areas are more likely to "*tiaow phuying.*" (which means to visit women for sexual intercourse). This however implies that paid sexual intercourse is only

sought away from home, which is not the case. Although the practice of visiting sex workers in every town that a man travels to is widely discussed, actual verification of men's sexual practices is something that research is only beginning to consider (see Bond 1994). And use of sexual services at home and away from home is not a topic which has been disaggregated to date.

Labor mobility has also been identified as a factor in women choosing to work in the commercial sex industry (Ford and Koetsawang 1991). Women who can reside outside the bounds of familial control can then decide for themselves how best to support themselves and often their relatives.

Cracking Down: Tightening the Control

Essentially, if the selling or buying of sex remains unseen and unheard, it is tolerated. This is best reflected in the first law regulating the sex industry, the Venereal Disease Control Act of 1909. In section 8, parts a and b, the closed, private nature of "prostitution" is emphasized,

> a. Prostitution must be practiced in a suitable place away from the public view.
> b. The area must be kept clean. (Fox 1957:Exhibit A)

Although it does not describe what a suitable place consists of, it reflects Thai sensibilities that what is not seen or discussed is not an issue for concern.

However, Western investigative journalism (and occasionally academic reports) have found reporting on Western men's consumption of sex a veritable field day. This has resulted in an

embarrassing situation for the Thai government. Usually not long after a particularly scathing report is issued, there is a brief "crackdown" on various establishments (Cohen 1982), some pictures of women workers in custody get printed in the English newspaper and then it is swept under the rug. In this way the Thai government appears to be doing something about the issue (stopping it), without punishing the tourists (men) or owners involved.

Recently however, Western and Thai investigative journalists have found their way into the what they had previously considered the fringes of the commercial sex industry, namely the brothels. Admittedly, the conditions in some of these places are horrible, as is the reality that the institution of slavery is alive and well, behind the doors lit with pink fluorescence. So, a number of embarrassing reports have once again emerged. And once again, the government has taken up the responsibility to go into these brothels and "liberate" or punish (arrest) women for their role in embarrassing the nation. Pictures are published in the newspapers and everything goes back to normal. But these "crackdowns" are actually much worse for the women. Even those women who would like to be "liberated" are often sent straight back to the same brothel after the media coverage dies down. Women taken into custody during these "crackdowns" run the risk of having their identities exposed in the media, being subjected to mandatory HIV and VDRL[14] checks and being asked a lot of impertinent questions by reporters. The days that they are imprisoned are added to their debts, as are any fines that the owners have to pay to free them.

[14] Venereal Disease Research Laboratory (VDRL) refers to the basic assay of tests used to check for sexually transmitted diseases.

As Sukanya so aptly said,

> "Claiming to attack the sexual slavery and the way women according to their image are exploited, concerned people have attacked, despised and humiliated instead, the slave in slavery" (Sukanya 1988:133).

Conclusion

It is clear from this discussion of the commercial sex industry that women are not even considered at any point in the construction of the industry, except how to get more from them and how to keep them coming. Women's bodies are seen as objects which men can use for labor, whether it be sexual or other.

The commercial sex industry has grown by taking advantage of the position in which women have been placed and has been supported (tacitly and overtly) by the institutions of power in Thailand. This makes women's position within the commercial sex industry even more difficult to negotiate. Many women are pressed into service as sex workers because it is deemed lucrative (which may or may not be true) and because their labor is not valued in other sectors of the economy as equal to that of men (see Gray 1990, Thinsa 1980 and Truong 1990). The real money in the commercial sex industry though, lies in the hands of the operators who have vested interests in ensuring that the demand for and the women working in the commercial sex industry continue.

Pasqua Scibelli (1987) names the Thai government as the biggest pimp of all. She says that by not enforcing labor laws, which would allow women to make the minimum wage, by ensuring that industry has a reason to pay women less (by not fixing structural inequities to higher education for women) and by discouraging unions from gaining too much power, they have ensured the conditions for exploitation of all women's labor including women's labor in the CSI. If the government were committed to ending injustice against women, they would see that suppression of the CSI is not the way to proceed. However, government reaction to reports on the sex industry and government sponsored conferences which continue to focus on how to best control and suppress commercial sex indicate that thinking has not yet progressed this far.[15]

This analysis has sought to provide some context about the commercial sex industry in Thailand. It has touched on some extremely complex issues in a general way to provide a foundation for further analysis. In order to look at these issues in more detail, they need to be discussed in a more specific context. Chiangmai, the second largest city in Thailand, located in the Northern part of the country provides one such context. It is here that we will now turn our attention.

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[15] This having been said, the Thai government, under the stewardship of the current Prime Minister, Chuan Leekpai, has made a number of scholarships available in 1993 and 1994 for Thai girls from the Northern provinces to continue their education.

Chapter III : The Commercial Sex Industry in Chiangmai

On this background of historical change; social, economic and political, a discussion about the actual structure of the commercial sex industry in Chiangmai and EMPOWER's work in that context becomes necessary to complete the setting of the research situation. This will be done first by providing on overview of the situation in Chiangmai and then looking more closely at how EMPOWER fits into this framework.

Sex Work in Chiangmai:

Historical information about the numbers and locations of places of commercial sex work in Chiangmai through time is lacking.[1]. Even academic writing on sex work specific to Northern Thailand often omits the details of locale. Other sources of information that sometimes provide historical background about the commercial sex industry are the accounts of foreigners, who write guidebooks to sex in Thailand with monotonous regularity and also pen semi-fictitious stories relating their numerous female "conquests" in this Kingdom. Publications by tourist agencies in Europe, North America and Japan, which specialize in tours offering sex, have also served to document the conditions and changes in Thailand to some extent. However, accounts specific

[1] Policy on "prostitution" is created in the legal and administrative center of Thailand, Bangkok and therefore is most accurately documented and monitored there.

to Chiangmai have been few until the last few years.[2]

If the written accounts are few, this is not a reflection of the industry itself, which seems to have blossomed. It is difficult to speculate whether the overall number of establishments selling sex has increased, or whether they have just changed their guises. However, if population increase and improved transport links with the city have any measure of effect on demand (which I would argue is the case), then the numbers of establishments as well as the numbers of women involved have increased. It is difficult to keep track of the numbers as well as the variety of establishments because of their high level of adaptability. This adaptable nature has increasingly become a necessity of establishments in the CSI due to increasing state intervention, in the form of either trying to end "prostitution," arresting illegal immigrants, or finding and rescuing children forced into the sex industry. Increasingly, state intervention has also taken the illicit form of police attempting to extort more money from the women, through the owners of CSI establishments.

For the purposes of classification, many of the people who write about issues surrounding sex work and many of the groups that work with sex workers in Thailand have attempted to attach labels to the women involved, which often describe degrees of personal freedom, clientele focus, or economic strata. Siriporn Skrobanek (1985) for example has found it useful in her analysis to talk about women who work in conditions of "free" and "forced prostitution." Within the

[2] I have not cited these works here in specific detail, because I do not want to be party to their further circulation.

category "free" she attempts briefly to deconstruct the meaning of the word free and what this means for women in the commercial sex industry. Another commonly used dichotomy of categorization describing women in the CSI has been the terms "direct" and "indirect prostitutes". This has become especially popular with epidemiologists, women's health physicians and staff at the Chiangmai STD Clinic. "Direct" in this case refers to women who work in places where men choose them for sex, without their active solicitation and have sex with them on the premises. "Indirect" in this case then refers to women who work in places that may offer other services or entertainments, but who may also solicit sex themselves or accept solicitations from men for paid sex and have sex in other locations. Erik Cohen (1987, 1985, 1982) finds a dichotomy between women who work with foreign clients (the focus of his work) and women who work primarily with Thai clients. For law enforcement officials, the distinctions are of less importance as every act of paid sex is against the law.

Although I believe that some of these labels hold some validity in terms of describing women's positions within the commercial sex industry, I do not believe that they can be accurately applied to refer to the women themselves. Therefore I find it more useful to talk about "women who work in the commercial sex industry" or "sex worker" as discussed earlier. These terms of reference reflect a greater fluidity and wider frame of reference which represent the continual movement of women in and out of the industry, while attempting to avoid stigmatization of their specific work. I use it to reflect their position, in terms of their status as workers in the industry, whether they sell sex or not. Although this may imply a homogenizing of women's experience, I prefer to see it as a recognition that labelling women is an ineffective method of analysis, rather

than an attempt to assert that the experience spoken of holds true for every woman in every situation.

Estimates of the number of women who work in the commercial sex industry in Chiangmai vary greatly. In 1992, the Public Health Ministry recorded approximately 2,300 women working in different areas of the commercial sex industry in Amphur Muang[3] (Public Health Ministry 1992). EMPOWER Chiangmai estimates that there are between 4000 and 5000 women currently working (Personal Communication, EMPOWER Chiangmai staff 1993.)[4] These figures represent the numbers of women working within the city's municipal boundaries and do not include the increasing numbers of workers in establishments in satellite towns surrounding Chiangmai or on the major transportation arteries connecting the city with towns and cities to the north and south which are given some attention by Kate Bond's (1994) work.

The following is a description of the working conditions, locale and format of commercial sex venues in Chiangmai. It is offered here to provide further understanding of the research context in terms of the diverse situations of women who use EMPOWER's services. It is also included here to provide more insight into how the research situation played itself out (described in Chapter four). Today then, establishments that often sell sex in Chiangmai include but are not

[3] Amphur Muang refers to the municipality of Chiangmai, which is also the area described in this paper.

[4] Official national government statistics compiled by the Public Health Ministry as reported by the **Nation** offer that there are 9,118 prostitutes in the Northern region (Mukdawan Sakboon, 11 July 1993), but do not offer statistics specific to Chiangmai city. However, the regional compilation most probably is derived from municipal surveys.

limited to;

1) Brothels: These places are usually located grouped in specific districts in the city (but are also found dispersed throughout the city, usually in the form of unmarked houses) and provide low cost "direct sex" with women. Men choose their partner(s) from a group of women often sitting behind a glass partition and usually have sex on the premises in the rooms that double as the women's living quarters. Women often have extremely limited freedom of mobility often due to illegal resident status, long working hours and/or debt to the owner.[5] Generally, they also have very little choice about whether or not they will accept a customer. These establishments can not be licensed under the 1966 Entertainment Act if sex is the only entertainment they offer.

2) Cafes: These places are similar to brothels, but are perhaps a step up economically (prices for sex are marginally higher). Their format varies from a brothel like cabinet in which the women sit to be chosen, to a set up where women go and sit with men at tables and serve them drinks. Almost all cafes have at least some rooms for sex attached, although some women go out with customers (some are even called by telephone for pick-up or to meet customers at a hotel). Whether or not they are forced to go with customers depends on each particular

[5] The issue of a sex worker's indebtedness is too large and diverse to be adequately addressed here. For a general understanding of how debt schemes are imposed, see the 1993 Asia Watch Report.

establishment and may also be connected with whether or not the woman has a debt. Some cafes are located in districts near brothels, while others have moved out to separate locations in the city. Depending on the set-up of a cafe, it may or may not be licensed.

3) Singing Restaurants/Restaurants: These places follow a similar locational pattern to brothels and cafes, with some in districts and others more separately located. Usually a small stage with many singers and dancers is set up surrounded by dimly lit tables. These structures range from open air, temporary structures with a thatch roof and bamboo walls to more permanent open air arrangements. Women employed there sit and wait for guests to enter and then sit with them to serve and chat. Most women live elsewhere and come to work in the evenings and are not indebted.[6] This type of venue should fall under the licensing procedure of the 1966 Entertainment Act.

4) Coffeeshops: These places were probably some of the first upscale places of commercial sex in Chiangmai. Often they are connected to hotels which sell rooms by both short and long time rates. The incidence of these places is decreasing sharply in the wake of the new "up-graded" form of coffeeshop, the Kara-o.k. These venues were part of the original licensing scheme for entertainment outlets allowed by the 1966 Act.

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[6] A 1991 study of an unnamed "Amphur" in the North found that of the 28 women they interviewed who worked in restaurants that sell sex, that 50% of them were <u>not</u> indebted (7.1% did not answer the question). This is compared with only 36% of 128 women they interviewed who work in brothels. It would seem that in Chiangmai city that this percentage is lower (Passorn Limanond et. al. 1991:46).

5) Kara-O.K.s: Some of the most lavishly decorated and lit venues of commercial sex in Chiangmai being established today are the Kara-O.K.s. They can range from small rooms with a Kara-O.K. system, to three and four story palace like structures. Most started on a small scale, hoping to attract the Japanese tourist's money, but the Kara-O.K. has also become very popular among the Thais. Women who work there are known as "hostesses" and some sell sex and some do not. Usually the price for sex is higher than brothels or cafes and women have a great deal of freedom in choosing a customer for sex (if the criterion of economic need is not considered). Although they may be found in small clusters in some parts of the city (especially around tourist areas) they are typically widely spread throughout the city.[7] Because officially Kara-O.K.s sell entertainment and not sex, they fall under the 1966 Entertainment Act licensing requirements.

6) Massage Parlors: Muecke (1984) mentions the opening of the first massage parlor in Bangkok in 1951. Although it is unclear exactly when the first one opened in Chiangmai, that they were an import from Bangkok (and from overseas before that) is certain. Following the style of Bangkok parlors to a large extent, there is typically a room filled with women, from which men select a "masseuse." Depending on the establishment, the man may pay for the services he wants at the desk when he pays the basic massage fee or may negotiate this with the woman. The price for sex is generally in the same range as the Kara-O.K.. Although women

[7] It is interesting to note that in some of the more recent crackdowns on prostitution that many of the cafes and brothels hung out signs indicating that they were actually Kara-O.K.s and re-arranged the physical structure of the place to reflect this. That the T.V. turned on without volume and music blaring from the stereo was the only form of Kara-O.K. that could be found indicated that perhaps they were not planning on staying that way for long.

have less ability to chose their customers, they are generally not indebted to the owners. Perhaps because of the immensity of these establishments and because many of them are recent new comers to Chiangmai, they have chosen to locate primarily on the perimeter of the city. It is interesting to note that within the last two years that one massage parlor/Kara-O.K. has opened within close proximity to the rear gate of the Chiangmai Air Force base and one new parlor has opened very close to the Kawila Army Barracks,[8] resonating the connection massage parlors have often had with the military. Licensing requirements follow those of coffeeshops and Kara-O.K.s.

7) Bars/Go-go bars: Bars generally follow a western style format for a bar and are located primarily in tourist areas of the city. A bar may or may not employ women who sell sex, some bars having a mixture of sex workers and non-sex workers. Often they also sell foreign food or have pool tables and foreign videos. They cater to a primarily foreign clientele and women often negotiate their own price for sex. Go-go bars, following the style of those located in the Patpong district of Bangkok, are a fairly recent phenomena in Chiangmai. There were a few located in various parts of the city that catered to a primarily Thai clientele in the past, until the opening of three new "Patpong style" places at the beginning of the tourist season in 1993 in the Thaphae gate area. Women are generally "bought out" by men who pay a "fine" at the bar, which may or may not include the price for sex. Women working in bars are generally not indebted to the owners or managers. Licensing requirements also follow those of coffeeshops, Kara-O.K.s and

[8] One of the most famous massage parlors in Chiangmai has been located close to Kawila Army Barracks for years.

massage parlors.

8) Others: Some women do sex work on a freelance basis, picking up clients from disco's, pubs, restaurants, bars, or dormitories, while still other women reside in unmarked houses which rely on word of mouth and tourist guides for business. Contrary to commercial sex work in North America, where many women work on the street, there are few women who work exclusively on the street in Chiangmai. Of course this is not to say that it does not exist. As in most places in the world, a list like this is hardly exhaustive.

One attempt to provide clarification about the differences between places of commercial sex was given in a recent Asia Watch report;

> "...entertainment places, such as massage parlors, bars and night nightclubs are considered legal if registered with the government [although selling sex from them is not]. The girls and women working in there have some ability to negotiate the terms of their employment and the nature of their interaction with their clients. Brothels, which can range from seven or eight girls in the back of a noodle shop, to a multi-story building with over a hundred workers, are, by contrast, illegal. In the brothels, the owners use a combination of threats, force, debt bondage and physical confinement to control the women and the girls, force them to work in deplorable, abusive conditions and eliminate any possibility of negotiation or escape" (Asia Watch 1993:53).

Because this Asia Watch report was concerned with the conditions under which Burmese women and girls are sold into the CSI, their description of these places is rather absolute. Actually, there is a fair amount of variety within each type of establishment in the CSI in Chiangmai. However, it is safe to say that the distinction which they elicit here holds for a majority of women.

But these descriptions of places which actually sell sex are only one part of what I refer to as the commercial sex industry. The success of the above listed places has maintained demand for other services, which have sprung up in proximity to establishments that sell sex. These other services are part of the larger community tied to the CSI that was discussed in Chapter two. Primarily, they are;

1). Short time hotels: These are usually located within walking or short driving distance of sex districts. They have even been adapted to the increased use of private vehicle transportation in the form of "curtain motels" where a gate or a curtain is drawn behind the car or motorbike, once parked in the garage adjoining the room, to protect the client's anonymity.

2) Food and Drink Establishments: Small shops and mobile vendors selling alcohol, food (fruit, noodles and other prepared food) and sundries (cigarettes, packaged snacks, sweets, condoms) are always located near commercial sex establishments, if as much for the workers as for the customers.

3) Other entertainments: While working up the nerve, or ingesting enough alcohol to actually go make a selection, young men often enter other entertainment establishments, such as discos, snooker halls, singing restaurants, or even video arcades which are often located nearby.

Ethnicity

Perhaps 10 years ago, most of the women working in the commercial sex industry in Chiangmai were of Thai nationality with a minority of women from various ethnic groups of Thailand also employed. But in the last 3-5 years, a huge influx of women from Burma[9] (primarily from the ethnic groups in the Northern part of Burma) have come to work and form probably 50% or more of the sex workers in Chiangmai today.

The comments of Michael Vatikiotis on trans-frontier migration of people to Thailand have resonance with many women's experiences,

> "Since the mid -19th century, the immigration of ethnic groups to the city of Chiangmai has consistently occurred for two reasons, flight from calamity and the pursuit of fortune" (Vatikiotis 1984:80).

The repressive political and economic situation as well as the on-going civil conflict between various ethnic groups and the military regime in Burma has created the conditions under which people are once again following patterns of migration followed for more than one hundred years. Trafficking of women from these areas has been gaining notoriety both with the Thai government and with international organizations, as the recently released Asia Watch report illustrates.[10]

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[9] Although the military dictatorship which controls Burma changed the name of the country to "Myanmar" in 1989, many of the groups fighting for change in this country refuse to recognize the change.

[10] Ethnicity plays an important role in the research context, both in terms of the ability to contact women in culturally and linguistically appropriate contexts as well as in terms of providing protection for those who are illegal immigrants. However, because it is a complex issue which warrants more information than I can provide here, I mention it here briefly to further elaborate the context, and provide more details about how this factor played itself out in

Those Northern Girls:

Much of the literature relating to the commercial sex industry, attempts to construct an understanding of exactly why women become involved in the industry. Some of this literature examines social, cultural and economic factors specific to the North and others reference the situation in Thailand more universally. In general, this literature focuses on five main topics.

First in the consideration of the literature are issues of trafficking, which is often tied closely to the forced labor of children being commercially sexually abused (Asia Watch 1993). A second main theme in the literature discusses various methods of recruitment of women into the industry (Pasuk 1982, Gray 1994). A more popular theme is an economic analysis of the financial factors which lead women to work in the CSI (Anchalee 1994, Gray 1990, Pasuk 1982, Thinsa 1980, Truong 1990, Siriporn 1983). Muecke (1992) has also attempts to look at the entry into the CSI from a cultural analysis. Truong (1990), Thinsa (1980) and Siriporn (1983) have also analyzed the CSI in Thailand from a cultural perspective by looking at the institutions of religion and education and how they position women as inferior and lead them into sex work. And the last main theme of the literature, which has been more recent, attempts to look at changing patterns of sexuality and its impact on the CSI (Gray 1994, Bond 1994, Anchalee 1994).

While these themes focussing on women's entry into in the CSI are important to an overall understanding of the context of commercial sex work in Thailand, within this attempt to explain

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subsequent chapters.

the situation in Chiangmai they are more detailed than can be adequately considered here. However, they do draw attention to why interest in the North in connection with sex work has become increasingly prominent in the past few years.

A great deal of the (government and media) attention paid to women working in the sex industry in the North can be attributed to increased media coverage of the area. However, the question becomes, why has the coverage increased? Although the answers vary, four main themes can be culled from the reports.

First, in the late 1970's and early 1980's, as the concept of development and how it could or should affect Thailand became an interest to the media, stories began appearing in the newspapers about villages in the North and their poverty. But, journalists also began to see villages without young women and began to hear the stories of villagers sending their children (and especially their daughters) into the cities to work. The emphasis was on the innocent trust of the villagers that the recruiters would care for their children, without any knowledge of the sex industry to which many were led (see Sanitsuda Ekuchai 1990).

Second, in this age of development, NGOs, both Thai and foreign, began forming and implementing programs with greater regularity and speaking out about the social issues which their organizations faced. "Prostitution," or at least the effects of it on the young women involved, were again brought out by both women's NGOs and health establishments.

Third, the HIV/AIDS situation in Thailand and the alarming statistics emerging on transmission in the North, once again focussed attention not only on the sex industry in Chiangmai, but also on the women originating from this area and their role in the sex industry all over the country.

And fourth, though not last, was the issue of trafficking (and conspicuously not the traffickers) of women which pulled attention back to the North yet again. Trafficking not only of Thai, but also Burmese and Chinese women, and of children, both Thai and illegal immigrants, through networks originating in the North, have been exposed in the press. And although women and children who are trafficked may start out in the North, even if only briefly, they are effectively spread throughout the country in little time. They are even trafficked overseas from Northern Thai origins.

EMPOWER's work:

EMPOWER's Chiangmai office was started in 1990, by two Thai university graduates, with the assistance of a foreign woman who had previously worked in EMPOWER Bangkok. Although the principles of the work were the same as the Bangkok office, establishing a rapport with the women took time. At first, the office, located in one of the brothel districts, functioned as a drop in center and school, which taught Thai, English and sewing.

As contacts with the women have increased and improved, the services they offer have also changed, reflecting the input of the women who use the center's facilities. While Thai and

English lessons are still the core of the program, sewing, hairdressing and typing lessons, as well as the translation service, have become more regular and permanent features. Also, an informal education program has started, which gives women the opportunity to continue their education as far as a high school degree. In addition, health advice, and counselling services have been added. Recently a mobile information center for women in the center as well as those who can not attend has also been established. This is all in addition to the role of advocate for women which has always been part of the organization. This advocacy role can take the form of accompanying a woman to a health center to ensure that she gets adequate care, assisting women with negotiations with boyfriends or speaking for/with women at conferences, meetings or with the press or researchers. And the program is increasingly run by the women themselves.

Aside from the services offered at the drop in center, EMPOWER's staff and volunteers also focus on outreach work, both to maintain connections with women they may not have seen for some time, and also to provide some of the services of the center to women who are not permitted to leave their place of work. Outreach work is often in the form of distributing newsletters printed by the Bangkok office or travelling around to inform women of an upcoming event or new class opening. It is also in the form of classes in the establishments themselves which aim at improving women's language skills as well as improving the self-confidence of women.

The focus of the work on all levels is to empower the women who attend. And the focus to empower is drawn from the women themselves to the extent possible. They act as counsellors

and friends to each other as much as the organizational staff. However, women's financial and familial commitments often restrict them from playing the roles which would lead to the organization being taken over by them completely. And as one staff member of EMPOWER suggested, women may enjoy the one thing in their lives for which they are not primarily responsible. This having been said, a core of women continue to return to EMPOWER to seek further educational opportunities, friendship or other assistance, but also to share experiences and things they have learned with others.

Contrary to what many people think of the people who use EMPOWER's services, many of the women who use the drop-in center are not necessarily sex workers. Some are bartenders, waitresses, younger or older siblings of women contacted through outreach work and some are even high school or university students. Although the majority of women are sex workers, other women are welcome to attend provided that they recognize that the target aim of the program is the empowerment of women, regardless of their profession.

EMPOWER's community of participants is diverse. It includes women from all socio-economic levels of sex work, non-sex workers, and both women who attend at the center and those who attend at their places of work. This is sometimes troublesome, because it means that there is a lack of community feeling and recognition that women face many of the same conditions regardless of their positions within the CSI or outside it. This is a problem EMPOWER has tried to resolve by inviting women who attend at the center (all women) to join activities at the

brothels, with limited success. This is primarily due to the inability to rely on or trust the owners of brothels or cafes who essentially imprison their women. It is also due to the necessity of keeping activities low profile, so as not to attract the attention of the police. This need to keep a low profile and protect women from police harassment both within the center's activities and those outside have affected the ability to organize and work towards breaking down barriers of misconception.

Decision making is generally done collectively, although finding time to sit down together to keep one another informed and participating in all decisions being made and programs being implemented is increasingly difficult as the scope and breadth of the program expands.

A typical day at EMPOWER begins in the late morning (but sometimes earlier based on commitments) when staff and women arrive at the center. A coordinating meeting may be held, administrative duties attended to or lessons prepared at this time. In the early afternoon more women arrive for classes. English, Thai, sewing, and informal education are some of the topics regularly covered. After classes there may be a special activity (a weekly workshop, yoga, aerobics, typing, hairdressing) in which women participate or letters may be translated. Visitors are also invited to come to the center after classes. In the late afternoon the staff and sometimes the women repeat classroom activities in outside establishments for women who cannot access EMPOWER's center. In the evening there is sometimes other outreach work to be done (bar visits, follow-up etc...). Interspersed in the day there may also be counselling sessions for women who request help specifically.

And everyone, both the staff and the women participating, is overworked.

It is sometimes unclear to the outside observer, the methodology for empowerment in the center or while discussing issues with women in bars or brothels. Perhaps most simply, EMPOWER endeavors to hear women's voices and respond to them, regardless whether it's their first or 100th encounter with the organization. This is a phenomena which few women experience with anything that could be referred to as regularity. EMPOWER's focus on teaching improved self-confidence by using student-centered teaching methods in all its programs also illustrates to women that learning can be something very different from their previous experiences with formal education, and that learning can also happen outside the classroom.

EMPOWER has recognized that education can act as a conduit for empowerment for women and strives to provide student centered learning opportunities for women who have little time or energy to learn. The staff are very responsive to women's learning needs and requests, which is one of the reasons for the program's continued expansion and success.

Conclusion:

While the term "commercial sex industry" may seem monolithic in many senses, in terms of the context described, it can be seen to represent many small parts of a non-contiguous whole, which while inter-related, are also independent, separate and certainly diverse. In Chiangmai, visible manifestations of the sex industry are only a portion of the landscape, which many people never even see. And even for those people directly involved, places selling sex commercially are only a small portion of the landscapes which make up their day, like any form of employment.

EMPOWER's work within this context which branches physical location, language, culture, gender, ethnicity and a number of other variables, is needed but stretched thin. While they are not the only NGO working in this field, their specific target group, implementation method and philosophy are unique.

From the outline of the strategies for research through discussions of the CSI generally and in a specific location, the context of the research has been slowly constructed. It is interesting to note, throughout the history reviewed and even to the present day descriptions of the CSI, that the voices of sex workers are notably absent. There is no indication of who women sex workers (or slaves for sexual service) were or are and what they thought about the legal, economic or social context of their work. Rather there are descriptions on the broadest level of these categories as related by other people, while women's voice has been lost. There has been no empowerment or organization by the women themselves or through the research that has been

produced. And while this phenomenon could be analyzed from the same viewpoints used to describe the CSI in the preceding pages, what the women really thought and felt and what really happened is gone.

From here, the discussion of the findings can now be presented with its scenery intact. Chapter four addresses, how all of these factors came together in space and time.

Chapter IV: On the Ground

This Chapter is a discussion of why, within the context of EMPOWER as an organization, this research project as it was constructed was not possible. It will unfold not only by discussing the logistical constraints, but also by addressing some of the larger issues regarding research involving sex workers in Thailand and the tension between the concepts of research and activism. It delineates, both the process that the research followed on the ground and illustrates how the strategies played themselves out in the place, both contextually as referred to above and in terms of location within the organization of EMPOWER.

This piece differs from that of a number of women writers (and others) who have taken time after the research process has concluded to reflect upon and outline the process the research followed (Shostak 1989, Patai 1988, Stacey 1988). It is an intimate description of the process and the indicators which pointed towards a premature conclusion of the research, before reservations about the final project were able to be seen in such a light. It is in many respects similar to Kim England's (1994) discussion of a "failed" research project and a reflection of the process, or the <u>making</u> of geography.

The Process:

Before returning to Thailand, there was a correspondence between myself and the staff at EMPOWER Chiangmai, but it was an indefinite one. In the correspondence, I delineated the methodology of the research and indicated some topics that I thought might be interesting to pursue, based on my prior experience with the organization. The response was interested and supportive, but wary and it was concluded that I would have to discuss the project in more detail upon arrival.

Upon arrival, I had preliminary discussions to describe the aims and intent of the project with the staff at EMPOWER. As described in Chapter I, collaboration with the organization was key to the communication with the women. Collaboration as a tenet of the research methodology also meant that any work completed as a result of the project for which there was a desire to continue, could then be conducted via the auspices of EMPOWER. This meant that a sustainable approach to the research could also be produced through collaboration, which would be impossible without an organizational context. Rather than the actual content of the project, which we felt should be left to the women's interests, the focus of the initial discussion was the on *methodology* and process the research would follow. The success of the project revolved around attaining agreement about the process prior to implementation of the project. This was especially important in the context of an organization like EMPOWER where confidentiality about the women's situation and identities is necessary. Guarantees that EMPOWER would not be party to a research document that

was detrimental to the organization's goals or to the women were prerequisites of the project.

Resistance:

The initial resistance on the part of the staff was to a topic that I had not even considered as potentially problematic. It crystallized around the questions, "What is research," and "what does research mean?" This led to further confusion regarding the methods of research, the intentions of research, and how this research fit into the context of this country (Thailand) and this particular group of women.

In retrospect, it is easier to see that a great deal of this confusion was caused by the open ended, "flexible" research strategies I had constructed (outlined in Chapter I) having the specific context of EMPOWER in mind. I knew that rigidity would be the undoing of the project, which was meant to be structured to include as much of the women's participation as possible. Rather than approaching EMPOWER and saying, "I want to do research on the how women in the commercial sex industry perceive HIV/AIDS and how those perceptions have been created," or "I want to do research on the wage labor systems within different socio-economic levels of commercial sex work in Chiangmai," I had an open ended framework and was prepared to allow the project to address a topic that the women perceived as important or necessary. I was also prepared to address a topic which EMPOWER as an organization felt would be useful to their needs. My main criteria were that the project involved collaboration on the part of the organization and the women and that the research process/project would

somehow work to benefit them. What I did not expect was how these strategies, steeped in feminist theory and practice, would seem abstract and amorphous and perhaps even somewhat secretive to the staff at EMPOWER or how they would return to the questions involving the definition of "research" itself.

During these initial discussions, there was a lack of resolution to many of the questions raised, but a commitment to continue to seek solutions and options for forward progress with the research. I believe this was due in large part to my former status as a volunteer with the organization, rather than a commitment on the part of the staff to make the project work, or even an agreement that the project was potentially useful to EMPOWER.

Because discussions about the project continued to revolve around the question, "what is research," it was decided jointly that clarifying this issue first was how we should start. In order to make the concept of research more clear both to the staff and to the women who may have participated in the project, it was decided to approach a local Thai researcher who was nearing completion of a study about perceptions of the urban environment in Chiangmai and ask her to discuss her work at EMPOWER. This was our attempt to construct an intermediary conduit to broach the subject of research with the women and allow the staff an opportunity to clarify their thoughts about research and how it could fit into the context of EMPOWER. It was also intended to give the women an opportunity to voice an interest in a research project involving themselves, if such an interest existed. It was felt that from this juncture, that I would then be able to discuss the methodology of the research project I had

constructed and potential topics that they might like to see researched about themselves.

The forum for this discussion was the regular Friday afternoon workshop held at EMPOWER, which generally addressed a range of topics, from health issues, to craft making, to dance classes, to planning of programmatic issues within EMPOWER itself. A small group of women who had attended the English classes that day gathered together and listened to the discussion of the situation of the urban environment in Chiangmai, the reasons why the study had been started, what information the study was seeking from the people who had responded and how the research was conducted (using a survey). Although some women were interested, others were clearly fatigued and interested was limited. It was clear that women did not see a connection between this research and how they might be participants in research as a group of women from EMPOWER.

Even though the response to this attempt to introduce research to women at EMPOWER was not a great success, I was still optimistic about the potential for a collaborative and empowering piece of research which could result from a research project such as the one I had outlined. I could still envision how women's voice could be solicited within a protected context and used to counter many of the homogenizing representations of sex workers that have been created. The strategies for conducting research were flexible enough to meet EMPOWER's needs and I was of the opinion that although there was some initial confusion about what the actual project would be, that the process of discussion with both the staff and the women could result in resolution of these problems. I also felt that the mechanisms for

change and alteration built in to the strategies meant that it could ultimately be adapted to the identified needs. What I began to realize at this juncture though was that the strategies were constructed based on an assumed problem or issue that I was expecting the women to identify. When this "issue" was not immediately forthcoming, I realized that a process of politicization of a problem needed to proceed the research.

Constraints:

However, I had underestimated the amount of time it would take to politicize women on the topic that we would carve out together. Idealistically, this was part of the research I had hoped that EMPOWER would have already established the groundwork on. Although this is not to say that EMPOWER does not function to do this - it does mean that their intent in politicization is not always carried through in a way that easily links it to research.

Partly due to the fluctuating participants in EMPOWER's drop-in center and due to concerns that face women more individually, EMPOWER has been forced to adopt quick processes to resolve issues. Although they may return again and again to a topic as it re-presents itself, long term strategies often get derailed by more immediate concerns. In this context, research which aims to focus on a single issue within a larger context is a difficult process to facilitate.

After the environmental researcher's lecture, the next step in the plan that I had formulated with the staff involved me introducing the research strategies to the women directly to elicit

where their interests were and whether they would want to participate in a research project. Although this was also to take the form of a Friday afternoon workshop, the intention was not to make a decision in one Friday, but to introduce the ideas and let women consider them. This would allow time to gauge the response from a number of different levels, both from my personal conversations with women, but also their discussions, concerns and feelings brought up with the other staff.

However, before this could be organized, one of the key staff members went on a study course in Australia for a six week period and it was felt that decisions could not be made without her presence and consent. Although this served to slow the entire process down, it also gave me a chance to reacquaint myself with EMPOWER more fully and see how things had changed and what remained the same. I found myself back in the classroom, both in the center and assisting with outreach work. I found myself following the same gruelling schedule which the other staff keep (which is perhaps not even as gruelling as the schedule the women themselves keep) and finding the "work" as separate from any potential topics or concerns about the "research," as taking a worthy precedence. And I was learning about what had happened in my absence in terms of other research projects with the organization as well as contextualizing past experiences into the frame of research. It could be called a period of lull in a conventional research context, because information sanguine to the topic of the research was not being sought out, but this period was pivotal in the decision about whether to continue with the research as envisioned or not.

During this period of time, many of the women I had previously known at EMPOWER were also asking me why I was back. Was I back to work at EMPOWER, on holiday, had I finished my degree? I answered that I was back to do research and was hoping to work with EMPOWER and women at EMPOWER to create a research project that would match interests between the two. Although I received some feedback from these women about their interests regarding the project or about their potential involvement, I did not pursue them, but simply answered questions asked of me. It was an awkward time in the research process, because I was not authorized to proceed with an agreed upon framework by either a group of interested participants or EMPOWER.

My return to the inside was not without issue. Although my status was as a "volunteer," I was also a potential researcher, which led to concerns about confidentiality regarding my interaction with women as a representative of EMPOWER. EMPOWER Chiangmai's policy regarding volunteers is straightforward. Nothing can be written about the organization or the women without the consent of those involved and volunteering for the sake of learning enough to write is not encouraged. My position in this situation was quite unique because I had made it clear that I was interested in writing, but only about a topic selected from within the organization and with their approval. I was prepared to exclude experiences faced while volunteering from the final product. I did not plan to even consider writing until a process and topic had been decided by all involved. With this understanding, I proceeded with the volunteer work described above.

Interestingly though, it was actually the process of removing myself from the research concerns and putting myself back on the "inside" that allowed me to view the context of the situation differently - and ultimately to abandon the project as originally conceived.

After one particular incident during this period of volunteer work which forced me to reconsider my position as a volunteer and researcher within the context of EMPOWER, I began to analyze the research project as a whole. I began to consider the timing, the methods and the appropriateness of a research venture such as this.

My concerns concentrated around the issues of consent, voice and power, none of which is mutually exclusive from the others, but which all meld together to form a complex array of issues that were not adequately being addressed within the research context. These concerns led to a temporary abandonment of the project, which led to a permanent abandonment of the project based on irreconcilable issues.

I would like to outline here these major concerns surrounding consent, voice and power individually, if only to seek some depth into how each played itself out. Although I realize that they reflect concerns generated for a very specific working context and for a very specific methodology of research, I would also like to explicate the issues and concerns that these problems raised not only within this context but may raise within other research contexts as well.

Consent:

Consent, especially in a project which plans interviewing and collaboration as the main research strategies, is an integral part of a research project, but one that is often addressed only in passing, especially in feminist geographical research. In the strategies derived, I envisioned consent being obtained on a number of levels, as well as being continually re-evaluated according to the needs of the women involved in the research project. There would be the process of obtaining initial consent for the project, consent from the organization and individual participants during implementation of the project, as well as consent for the final analysis and written form that the document (thesis) would take. This evaluation and re-evaluation as well as process of continually informing and reinforming about what would be included or excluded from the final project I felt would be sufficient to address the needs and concerns of the people to be involved.

I was aware that this was not only a time consuming task, but a difficult one in terms of the breach of consent which many sex workers have faced in their experiences with research and other media forms. Women working in the CSI in Thailand as well as other countries are often subject to pictures taken of them without their consent, with labels attached to them which serve to define them negatively.[1] And in some cases, their words, which spoken in their entirety serve to provide an accurate portrayal of the story they are trying to tell, are

[1] Women at EMPOWER have stated unequivocally that they do not want pictures taken of them while at the EMPOWER center.

edited for brevity leaving only the stories of victimization which represent them as lacking agency and power. The stigma placed on sex workers worldwide has meant that when women have found a voice and speak out on topics which have meaning to them while they are involved with commercial sex work, they sometimes later wish that they were no longer associated with the particular article or report for which they had once given consent.

One staff member at EMPOWER gave me the example of a panel discussion on "Sex Talk," that she had seen on television in Britain. One of the panelists was an articulate, confident sex worker who discussed her position and feelings about the topic being addressed. Two years later, when in Britain again, the same program was played, but there was an announcement at the beginning of the program, saying that some of the participants had asked not to be identified. The program was shown, but this time, with the woman sex-worker's face "censored."

Selling sex as an occupation is something that societies (both Thai and other) view with differing degrees of morality. It can be viewed as sinful or avaricious or pitiful to name a few of the more common perceptions. Although this thesis has not attempted to outline Thai society's moral views on sex work, it has pointed out quite clearly that selling sex is against the law. And while the Thai government has allowed a certain amount of voice to sex workers, their use of voice remains tenuous due to the illegality of their profession.

Discomfort with giving consent has also been experienced by women at EMPOWER who have given interviews or written articles about their experience in the commercial sex industry in Thailand (or other parts of the world). While in most cases the names and identities of women participants have been changed, women who move away from the CSI know that something about their prior experience is in print, perhaps even in a language that they themselves do not understand. There was one very clear example of this which was being dealt with at EMPOWER while the lull in research activities was passing.

A video research project on friendship between sex workers in Chiangmai conducted in collaboration with EMPOWER had recently concluded when I returned to Chiangmai. Consent for the initial project had been obtained from the women who participated, but the researcher left with the footage before allowing the women to see the images that she had created. However, some initial cuts were sent back to EMPOWER with a request for more detailed translation. These cuts were inspected by the participants and they were not entirely at peace with what they saw. The women no longer wanted to been seen as part of the project and wished to withdraw (although this was not offered as an option by the researcher). They eventually agreed to allow the final video to be produced (consented) with comments like, "I want to help her to get good grades at school," or "She is my friend and I can not say no."

This scenario represents some of the issues my role as an insider at EMPOWER and defining the line between "research" and where my other roles as a teacher, friend or counselor started

and stopped. Although it was clear to me that I did not intend to use any information that I had not solicited "for the record," this was obviously not clear to the women as the example below illustrates. And this lack of clarity and its potential to undermine the work EMPOWER was doing with women in the CSI was the ultimate factor in my deciding to abandon the research as it had been constructed.

As stated above, during the period when no concrete decisions about how the project would proceed had been made, I found myself back in the classroom, teaching English to women. I saw that there was a need at EMPOWER for more assistance and offered my services, as I had done in the past. At this point, I had discussed with some of the women that I had returned to Thailand hoping to facilitate a research project based on what women would like to have researched about their situation, or a topic that EMPOWER would find useful. I did not outline the strategies, except to say that they <u>might</u> take the form of interviews, and I thought that I had made it clear that <u>nothing</u> had been decided with the EMPOWER staff and the women as a group and therefore that nothing was happening at the moment.

At this point, I was back on the inside. I was returned to the roles of teacher, friend and counselor within the context of EMPOWER (with the role as researcher hovering unexplained along the edges). And within this context, one woman who had recently tested HIV positive chose to reveal her status to me and indirectly ask for my support and assistance. When this same woman later discussed a health problem she was having with me, I discussed it with the EMPOWER health worker. The health worker asked me, as a matter of convenience to get a

picture of this woman from a year earlier in order to gauge the amount of change in her condition, if any. I asked the woman for a picture while visiting her at her home and told her why I wanted the picture. She gave the picture to me. But as I was leaving, she came running out into the alley and asked me, "Are you going to use that picture in your research to tell men in America not to come and sleep with women in Northern Thailand, because they will get AIDS?"

I was shocked. I could not imagine how she had thought that my intention was to deceive her into giving me a picture in order to tell people in other countries, using another language, about her situation. But as I reflected on the experience, I realized that her voicing her concern about my intended use of her picture was only brought up with me because she felt she *could* ask. And that there were potentially many other women who were fearful about my research intentions, who did not feel confident enough to ask.

Returning to the notion of consent within the context of this example; although I thought I had made it clear that I was not doing the research at this point, an interim understanding that the research was proceeding had formed. I had not expected the ambiguity it created in the mind of at least one woman (and I knew her well enough that she felt comfortable to address it with me). How else the uncertainty in the minds of the women had grown, I could not be sure. If one woman felt she had to double check regarding her refusal of consent (for a disclosure never intended as part of the research project in any form), how many others were avoiding me or EMPOWER in more a more passive form of refusing consent?

I found this ambiguity in direct conflict with my volunteer position with EMPOWER and found myself also asking the difficult question, "which was more important, the work or the research?" And perhaps because the ambiguity surrounding the research was not about to be resolved soon, I found myself answering, the work.

Audrey Kobayashi (1994), who has combined activism and research in her work for years has not felt a tension between the two. But in the case of EMPOWER, where a direct conflict between the aims and objectives of the group as well as the operating methods was causing (and will likely always cause) conflict between the work and research agendas, an irreconcilable gap had formed. This tension was crucial in the decision to abandon the research as it had been previously outlined.

This realization, in combination with other situations where I recognized some levels of resistance or avoidance from the women and the staff of EMPOWER regarding my intentions with the research, led to discussion with the EMPOWER staff regarding their fears and concerns about the research. This consequently led to an agreement that what would be most useful for EMPOWER as an organization would be detailed discussion of the reasons why it was not an opportune time to facilitate a research project with the women who use EMPOWER's services and the constraints involved in ever undertaking such a project. Although, in this piece, I will not outline all of the reasons, I hope to shed some light on some of the larger issues and provide some insight into reasons why within the context of EMPOWER, that research that seeks information is not necessarily a useful tool.

Consent, is only one of the factors involved and a full discussion of its implications in research with an organization like EMPOWER is not yet concluded. As alluded to above, language and how consent would be obtained with each individual for her words for a project in which the final analysis would be in English has not yet been addressed. Although I planned (as outlined in Chapter I) to return all transcripts and potential words to be used in the final project to the women before including them, how to translate them back to the women became problematic. Ideally, I would have translated the segments to be used, into English and then translated those segments back to the women in Thai. However, in addition to this being a precarious process, I was also unprepared for the increased numbers of women in the CSI whose knowledge of Thai was even more limited than my own. Was it fair to use information from these women in a language that was not their own and then to return translations to these women in this second language?

Although most authors who return texts to women for their consent or changes include some discussion of this process, one must assume that authors take consent for the entire text and leave a discussion of which parts are most likely to be used out of the discussion. I feel that this area of obtaining consent has not been adequately addressed in discussions of the research process. It seems to leave gaps regarding the participant's level of comfort with the interview text as a whole. This dismisses the possibility that the small parts that they feel unsure about, while feeling more or less safe with the text as a whole, may be the very parts which the researcher chooses to excerpt.

While in the construction of the final document, I had hoped that the staff at EMPOWER would act as signalers for potential areas of sensitivity. However, I was aware of the ambiguity remaining and felt a level of discomfort with this unexplained area within the research process. And I also realized the imposition and impracticality of asking the staff of EMPOWER to undertake such a monitoring role considering their already overburdened work schedules.

Within this context of obtaining consent across the boundaries of language, culture and specific references, the issue of time also makes itself apparent. The academic arena is hardly generous with its requirements regarding the time spent in the research process, unless unlimited financial resources are at the disposal of the implementor/facilitator. Although, I had been generous in my time allowances for a Master's degree (an original six month period extended to one year's field work and writing), it was clear that to obtain consent on all the various levels outlined above, that this period of time would be insufficient. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why there has been so much debate and criticism of research methodologies. There is a need for the academy to realize the constraints of collaborative and equitable research projects and the time that is required to implement them according to their aims.

The last concern I had within the context of consent was women's freedom to choose involvement in the research project. If the women perceived the project as something EMPOWER supported, but they themselves did not agree with, would they then choose to

stop using EMPOWER's services due to the research project? Would they choose to participate less than willingly in order to continue to receive any benefits they perceived as available at EMPOWER in other areas? Would EMPOWER's perceived interest and support for a project potentially drive women away from an organization which is essentially theirs?

Although the context of the research was meant to be empowering and fit within the aims and objectives of EMPOWER as an organization, these concerns were made apparent in the period before the research started. And if women chose to stay away from the organization, because another facet of the empowerment process (research) was included; was the project actually meeting the intention of empowering women?

Voice:

> "Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and if so, what are the criteria for validity? In particular, is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged that me?" (Linda Alcoff 1991:7)

In the process of initially researching the experience of other women researchers' inclusion of women's voice in their written texts and how they attempted to meld myriad voices together and create polyvocality without enforcing homogeneity while giving reign and precedence to the voices of their collaborators, I found a trail fraught with difficulty and disappointment. There seemed to be more questions than answers to issues such as; how does an author minimize the superseding of her voice over others in the text, how does one (re)present the lived world and lives lived by other people, how does translation through language and

culture change the meaning of texts, how do analyses by the author have the potential to change the meaning of the collaborators, and the question of, why is it my voice ultimately speaking?

> "...if I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege? If I should not speak for others, should I restrict myself to following their lead uncritically? Is my greatest contribution *to move over and get out of the way*? And if so, what is the best way to do this - to keep silent or to deconstruct my discourse?" (Alcoff 1991:8, emphasis in the original)

During the break in the research, while waiting to decide on the form that the project would take, it became clear to me that in my rush to construct a project which would bring out the "subjugated" voice of Chiangmai sex workers that I had overlooked the fact that they already have a voice. In the two years prior to my recent return, women had participated in 3 full length plays, had attended and spoken at conferences, had attended training on various topics, had written articles and stories that had been published and had participated in research. This is not to say however that some of the more influential forms of media such as newspaper and television had given them a voice that (re)created them as anything but victims. But I had to ask myself the question whether the inclusion of these women's voices in research was any better than the other ways that they were finding to use their voices? And related to that, why, if they were already testing their voice in other mediums, would it be useful or empowering for me to impose my voice over theirs? If it was in the name of academic qualification (my own), I could not see the utility. I had to ask whether the more useful project was to assist them to develop their voice, to find its power and nurture it, rather than yet again impose my voice over theirs (a common trait of the newspaper and other articles

written about the CSI in Thailand that I was trying to counter). As Alcoff (1991) asks herself about her research, "Will it enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples?"

The use of women's voice has effectively brought attention to the plight of women in different areas of the world who have been exploited and lack the power and voice to speak for themselves (Asia Watch Reports, Amnesty International Reports, Human Rights Watch Reports). This process can also be dangerous if used to expose thoughts and positions to others who may not look kindly on their attempts to speak (in the case of Thai sex workers - owners, police, government).

This is primarily a problem for women who write (speak) for others from a position of relative power. What we dare to say and how we dare to say it, is not necessarily compatible with how the speakers would have us say it. While this was not the intention of this research project in any form, the insidious forms it had the potential to take on meant it was an issue that behooved careful consideration. EMPOWER as an organization plays a monitoring role in this respect, encouraging women's voice, but also attempting to outline the possible backlash spoken words may incur outside the structure of the organization. They provide a framework within which women can experiment and learn, a framework which independent researchers or persons from the media can not necessarily provide (or want to provide) for their collaborators.

Kim England (1994) broaches one way in which this played itself out in her fieldwork,

> "Like Stacey, I have to admit there have been interviews when I have listened sympathetically to women telling me about the details of their lives (my role as a participant) while also thinking how their words will make a great quote for my paper." (England 1994:86)

Although I am not trying to say that an organizational context would remove this type of dilemma from the research process, the focus is different if the project is political and sensitive rather than purely academic.

The question of protection and overprotection of voice on an organizational level is one that follows closely on this subject. While EMPOWER plays a protective role, discussing with women the possible advantages and disadvantages of speaking for themselves and others, the question of when their function is overprotective for women's interests is one that I think neither the staff at EMPOWER nor the women have found a tenable balance. It has taken many years for EMPOWER staff to build trust with women with whom they work. But once this trust has been established it almost becomes problematic in terms of contact with others through EMPOWER. Because EMPOWER encourages voice and individual thought within the center, occasionally a visitor to the center hears more than a woman would usually tell an outsider, because the trust of the organization has been conferred to that person.

Audrey Kobayashi (1994) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) have recognized, as have other feminist writers that the cultivation of a strong, independent voice is often the result of the luxury of many years with sufficient resources to maintain oneself (often without major

responsibilities). And as Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, this is a luxury that few women have. Women who have voice and have gained power from it, speak from a position of power when asking other women to join them.

In this context, the question of "audience" also became an issue. As Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989) pointed out in their critique of postmodern ethnography, feminist ethnographers as well as feminists in general (see Harding 1987) see a need to have their writing and research be used for political ends. And in this context, the audience for the research does not necessarily reflect the more traditional academics ones, but is more often aimed at producing a document that reflects the attitudes, situations, or perhaps processes of group research and how this led to change. This was the case with the piece that I was attempting to create. It was intended as a document which would be used primarily within EMPOWER and secondarily for the academic enterprise. Questions involving how women's voice could *become* the piece, without subjugating itself to the level of language which many academics prefer was not adequately addressed. For the piece to be accessible to all women, a written text was not necessarily the appropriate medium. Rather, a text of voice, spanning many languages and many cultures would have more accurately reflected how women currently use their voices.

It could then be argued that the challenge of the thesis was to create such a text, without boundaries, a text accessible to all. Such a project, which perhaps reflects a more accurate assessment of the needs at EMPOWER, holds merit. But ultimately, it would seem that a

more useful project would be to ask interested women to cultivate their voices for their own ends rather than imposing my own. And this would also fall in more closely with the aims and intentions of EMPOWER's project.

Perhaps the most important factor under considerations of voice though, is how the women want to use their voices. As alluded to above under consent, many women in Chiangmai do not want their voice to be significant as "sex workers," but seek to align themselves with larger issues affecting all women. And indeed, singling out women to speak on the issues of sex work serves to segregate their experiences as women in Thailand as discreet from other women, based on occupation.

Power:

As Trinh T. Minh-ha has pointed out, the power to name and the power to represent lived experiences or lives themselves, carries with it an ingrained power differential.

> "Naming is part of the human rituals of incorporation, and the unnamed remains less human than the inhuman or sub-human. The threatening Otherness must, therefore be transformed into figures that belong to a definite image repertoire." (Trinh 1989:54)

She also points out what this can mean in terms of representation.

> "One cannot seize without smothering, for the will to freeze (capture) brings about a frozen (emptied) object." (Trinh 1989:63)

How a writer portrays the final project and with what analysis serves as a permanent interpretation of a moment in time. And while postmodern ethnographers have argued that

doing this, but revealing the author's biases and emotional attachment rather than attempting to maintain an "objective neutrality," move further to re-presenting a more honest version of the "truth," this is a path laden with inconsistencies and incongruities. As Trinh points out above, these attempts to (re)present a lived world can often serve to remove the topic's life, making it simply a possession or a shadow of its reality.

The issues about representation that were of concern to me in the first Chapter and my ideas about how to resolve them became no clearer on the ground. Although the context never truly developed to the extent where the form became an issue, many of my questions about representation as deconstructed by Trinh T. Minh-ha remain the same.

Power and the Researcher:

Marnia Larzeg (1989) in her discussion of the hegemony of academic discourse which fails to recognize difference among diverse groups of women comments;

> "The political bias in the representation of difference is best illustrated by the search of many feminists for the sensational and uncouth. This search for the disreputable, which reinforces the notion of difference as objectified otherness is often carried out with the help of... women themselves." (Larzeg 1989:89)

This resonates with a great deal of the research regarding women in Thailand. The power to ignore difference and to characterize Thai women as victims is one that many academics have held and reinforced.

Darunee and Pandey (1987) point this out in their analysis of the status and role of Thai women when they say,

> " The contemporary popular media has often portrayed Thai women in fragmented images concentrating on two extreme strata of Thai society. It has popularized Thai women as either being unusually progressive and emancipated, by citing examples of successful female executives or business women, or being oppressed, victims of prostitution. This dichotomy has been reinforced by academic studies which focus on only one or the other aspect of the position of women in Thai society." (Darunee and Pandey 1987:125)

This was also found by Mattana and Siriporn (1986) in their analysis of images of Thai women in the media. They say,

> "...the conclusion drawn is that women portrayed in the above [programs of two radio stations, one civil and one military] is still very much confined to the traditional ideology by which the dichotomy of decency and indecency is reinforced." (Mattana and Siriporn 1986:238)

Much research (Pasuk 1982, Cohen 1982, 1985, 1987, Gray 1990, Sukanya 1983, 1988, Muecke 1992, Siriporn 1983, Truong 1990, Thinsa 1980) which has focussed on the CSI in Thailand aims to outline the cultural, legal, religious and economic barriers which women in modern Thailand face and how these barriers have forced women to choose sex work as an employment option. While not denying that structural barriers do exist, this type of analysis serves to reinforce the negative stereotypes of sex work while trying to pardon women for being involved in the CSI by placing blame elsewhere. This denies women agency in the process. And while this type of research has served to illuminate where these barriers lie, it has not done much to rectify the stereotypes or problems identified, nor has it made sex work more acceptable in Thai society. This is similar to the search for the "sensational and

uncouth" that Larzeg refers to, "which reinforces the notion of objectified otherness."

This type of research is contradictory to the aims of EMPOWER which seeks to minimize the differences and seek unity between women on the basis of the common situations that women in a number of occupations face. The original research strategies also attempted to circumvent this "othering" of sex workers, by asking them to have their voice be heard. However, on the ground, the questions posed to me by EMPOWER revolved around, "why this group of women then?" Why are these women being singled out as a separate entity again, and being identified as discreet from other women, whose voices are just as significant?

This brings up the issue of why a research project which seeks to find voice from any group of women focus on sex workers in particular. Does this effort only serve to homogenize sex workers as a group of women that is different than others? Does it serve to reinforce the boundaries that society has already constructed which position these women as "other." And if so, can a project like this be empowering for such a group of women? And, "Does it truly allow sex workers to speak back to the representations created of them in the popular media?"

Power and Money:

Most researchers who have made it to Northern Thailand have done so by receiving a research grant. And research grants focussing on Northern Thailand are increasingly plentiful in one area of research - HIV/AIDS. This is not only true in terms of research funding, but also organizational funding - as EMPOWER has found. And while researchers approaching EMPOWER to discuss undertaking HIV/AIDS projects within the context of EMPOWER may be attempting to incorporate the thoughts and opinions of sex workers into their overall research project, one thing that women at EMPOWER have made very clear is that they are not interested in being researched, especially if it involves linking them yet again with HIV/AIDS.

Perhaps because the sex industry is so well publicized in Thailand and overseas, researchers interested in HIV/AIDS tend to simplistically narrow their focus to look at sex workers (while ignoring their clients). Certainly, women who are easily located (at work every evening or at EMPOWER every afternoon) are the most convenient for researchers to single out. But, as long as institutional financing committees see the relevance in linking sex work to HIV/AIDS, they will also divest themselves of the opportunity to include women's voices from at least one sector of the population that they would like to include.

Research/Activism:

The tension between my position as an insider at the organization also holding the alternative label of "researcher" resulted in some ambiguity both on the part of the women and within the organization (as illustrated above). These ambiguities were in direct conflict with the work of the organization. And while this is a context specific discussion, researchers moves towards politicizing their work and having it fit into the context of activist movements, needs further thought and consideration. Because although the intent of such work may be aimed at serving the interests of those organizations, when the nature of the organization's work is private or sensitive (as is the case with EMPOWER) the separation between the work and the research becomes unclear for those involved, and may not be a distinction that an organization or participants are willing to make. Kleiber and Light (1981) who completed research for the Vancouver Women's Health Collective as a requirement for the collective's funding while facing a potentially similar experience, stated;

> "Another point of tension centered around members' fear that by revealing information to us about the workings of their organization they might be endangering their cause of feminism and political change... For our part (the researchers), we learned to respect these fears and to become more sensitive to some of the dangers of collecting information about a group opposed to the mainstream of society." (Kleiber and Light 1981:171)

However, Kleiber and Light's position was a mandated one. And one wonders what the outcome of their project might have been had they suggested it to the collective independently.

Maria Mies (1983) in her suggestions for a methodology for feminist research says that;

> "Participation in social actions and struggles, and the integration of research into these processes, further implies that the *change of the status quo* becomes the starting point for a scientific quest." (Mies 1983:125)

But here Mies neglects to discuss how involving (or removing) oneself in the social actions and struggles will affect the movement itself and whether research can be the tool for these things at all. She suggests that the impact of the researcher will be to disrupt the normalcy of the situation that will consequently politicize the research participants to recognize "relationships (that) are oppressive or exploitive." Whereas, Mies strategies seemed like useful guidelines for the construction of research strategies at the outset of the project, the issue of power, while discussed in a vague manner is left out almost entirely from her work. At times the process which she follows in her research almost seems voyeuristic, as if the struggle was hers to unfold and report, rather than that of lived women's lives.

I was particularly concerned that my positions as teacher and friend would influence women to participate out of respect for people who hold such positions. While within the context of EMPOWER this hierarchy of respect is dismantled as much as possible, by using student centered teaching methods and encouraging women to learn from one another rather than always looking to the staff for answers, it would be far from genuine to say that the traditional respect for teachers and friends is not a powerful influence in this context. While many of the women who whom I had hoped to work would position me as "teacher," with all its concomitant meanings, others would position me as "friend," further blurring the lines

between my role as researcher and as volunteer in the organization of EMPOWER.

As the example above illustrates, at least one woman had already assumed that I was conducting the research. The belief that this was within my power and right to do, meant that if they did not want to participate, that their choice was to keep their distance.

Conclusion:

Following from a good deal of feminist literature, I attempted to construct a research project which would give women enough maneuverability to alter and change and to adapt as their own. What I had failed to consider carefully enough was the organizational context of EMPOWER, whose separation from the academic process and overriding concern with more immediate issues necessitates that their commitment lay elsewhere.

From issues as complex as consent, voice and power, to larger concerns regarding the relationship between research and activism, I saw the project as untenable in the short term. This is not to say that attempt to construct projects like this should be abandoned in their entirety nor that discovering and thinking through how this context has formed has not been a valuable experience. How to proceed from this point becomes the next topic for discussion, which I address in my concluding remarks.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This thesis has moved from strategies, to context to the findings "on the ground." It delineated the strategies for attempting research with a group of sex workers within the organizational context of EMPOWER and created a framework from which to proceed with the research. It then set about explicating the context of the research, within the setting of the commercial sex industry in Thailand, within Chiangmai and within the context of EMPOWER in order to provide information about and base from which the research was to proceed. It established a loose framework for the research from which to problematize issues and concerns as they presented themselves. This was necessary in order to provide the basis for collaboration with the women themselves and EMPOWER.

It then presents the results of the process and a discussion of how these strategies played themselves out on the ground. It outlined issues of consent, voice and power relationships and how they worked together to illustrate that the research as conceptualized was inappropriate in the context of EMPOWER and for the women themselves.

Themes in the Research:

An underlying theme throughout this piece has been the identification of "education" as a key need for working with EMPOWER as an organization. Because the main tenet and working strategy of the organization involves education on all levels - it follows that a research project

seeking connection with EMPOWER would have similar goals. And while this is not entirely unfeasible it does differ from the traditional aims of research, which are to uncover and discover, rather than provide education.

This thesis is the result of this realization, but also the result of coming to a clearer understanding of the goals and work of EMPOWER and analyzing how they do not necessarily coincide with the goals of traditional research. It is also a realization that within the context of this NGO, research was a less important need than pursuing the work that the NGO had established for itself.

One part of this project may be referred to by readers as what Alcoff calls, "the retreat response." She outlines,

> "This response is simply to retreat from all practices of speaking for and assert that one can only know one's own narrow individual experience and one's own truth and can never make claims beyond this...
>
> However, opting for the retreat response is not always a thinly veiled excuse to avoid political work... Sometimes it is the result of a desire to engage in political work without engaging in what might be called discursive imperialism." (Alcoff 1991:17)

This resonates strongly with the attempt to create a research project with EMPOWER. Rather than pressing an unwanted and uncertain research project with the women, there was (political) work to be done that did not need documentation (discursive imperialism). At the same time, the process of the work led to the recognition that research within the context of EMPOWER (and perhaps other organizational contexts) must involve a process of giving (education, a useful

product or knowledge, such as a training manual, or services such as health or translation), rather than simply taking (uncovering, reporting). This is something that Oakley (1981) found and discussed in her work interviewing mothers. In Oakley's context as a mother/researcher interviewing women during their first pregnancy, she found it difficult if not impossible to refrain from sharing information with the anxious mothers to be. In this way, her research became as much a process of giving as receiving information. This is clearly a need for research within the context of EMPOWER.

As was outlined above, issues of consent, voice and power in the context of research with sex workers raised a number of questions that could not be answered satisfactorily. But perhaps even more critical than this was the tension between activism and research generated in this specific case. When the methodologies of the research and the work were in conflict, the work had to take precedence, a topic which the publications advocating this type of research strategy neglect to discuss.

Another underlying theme throughout this piece has been the result of the absence of women's voices. When voices do appear they are sheltered by anonymity or lack of reference. Women's voices do not appear in the Chapter two or three and instead references are primarily to academics who have researched certain aspects of the CSI. At no point is there a woman who discusses what her experience of the CSI is in history or in the present day. For the present day this absence of voice is perhaps the strongest indicator that women do not want to be identified as only sex workers. Their aspirations to be seen as part of mainstream society means that using

their voice to speak only on sex work is not a position they are willing to take. They do not see themselves as constructed so discreetly. Indeed, if women at EMPOWER were to speak out as "sex workers," following the original format of the thesis, a long process of politicization needed to proceed the research. But the women themselves within the context of EMPOWER have not identified this as a priority.

A third theme running through this work is the setting of organizational involvement and collaboration as a method of undertaking research that seeks to empower. Possibilities for research with sex workers do exist outside the boundaries of organizational or institutional context. With enough language and enough perseverance, it would be possible to construct a project with a group of women approached from the "outside." Whether a research project that aims to empower could be constructed in such a context remains a question. I would argue that in the context of women working in brothels or cafes, the potential for endangering women's positions with the owners as well as with their local protectors (police) is high. While the risk may be seen as lower for women working in other sectors of the commercial sex industry (foreign oriented), many of the same constraints apply. Without an organizational context, the most an academic can hope to do in terms of research is report the situation. This has been done (Da Grossa 1988, Pasuk 1982, Kitti 1973, Thepanom 1980, Cohen 1982, Patsorn et al 1991, and Somsiri 1978) repeatedly in the case of Thailand. And if the conclusion of the research is that women are oppressed and victims, what is empowering about research which leaves women's working conditions and job position's the same? Also, what is the point of continuing to segregate these women from other women in society based on their work?

Within the goal of research that aims to empower and not to endanger, I would argue that an organizational context is necessary for a researcher. An organizational context serves both to provide context for future goals established during the research as well as acting as a monitor of research activities. If the goal is equitable participation and representation within the research process, then I argue that an individual researcher is not appropriate.

Future Possibilities:

Part of the process of this research has been to focussed on finding a path forward, to construct possibilities for the future, rather than leaving dead ends for researchers to encounter. As many academics have found, it is much easier to criticize than to build a platform from which to move forward. In this respect, although this particular project was not successful in its original inception, it came to fruition in a different (and for EMPOWER, more appropriate) form. In discussions with EMPOWER staff and also as a result of the findings of this research, there are opportunities for research within the context of EMPOWER.

Some of the most potentially useful research projects with EMPOWER which would tie the political to the academic would revolve around providing an organizing structure for women to focus on one potentially controversial or risky topic, such as labor conditions and demands for improved working conditions, or demanding better services from the local health services etc... Each involves a component of education and action. But here, the impetus must begin with EMPOWER and not an outside researcher. If EMPOWER (meaning both staff and women)

identified an issue that needed more in depth action and invited a researcher to explore the issue with them, the twain of research and activism might move closer to a workable scenario.

Other ideas which might work in the EMPOWER context include projects which would aim to analyze women's experience with research and media in greater detail and teach them to use these tools to meet their own goals of empowerment. To reiterate an earlier theme though, the process would need to focus on education and the process of empowerment, rather than the framework of sex workers experience. Ideally it would be a framework about teaching about research that could be used with any group of people. This type of framework would serve to breakdown the assumptions that sex workers are a discreet group separate and different from other groups of women or workers and would give them a frame of reference for action. It would also be a time consuming process, because if the issue was not identified by the women at EMPOWER as problematic, the process of politicization referred to in Chapter four would also have to become a component of the research.

Similarly, designing a course on a topic of interest to EMPOWER and implementing that course (a topic which perhaps still lies outside the boundaries of geography in its current inception) would be a potentially useful project. A teacher's manual for teaching English or Thai to adults, focussing on conversational and reading skills would be one example of this. Or the creation of health education materials for this group of women focussing on transmitting messages to a diverse population would also be a useful project.

Perhaps an even more important project would be to examine the EMPOWER's model of organizing and analyze it as a model for women's empowerment more generally in Thailand.[1] Because this model was developed in Thailand, for Thai women, it's potential for other women's groups is significant, but remains un-explicated.

Even research which seeks to examine a topic sanguine to all women's or worker's situations in Chiangmai, but that seeks the input of sex workers as one voice among many voices, to deconstruct the homogeny of sex work as discreet (see Darunee and Pandey 1991) might be a project with which EMPOWER could collaborate. But directly questioning women about their experience with sex work or perceived connections between sex work HIV/AIDS will never fall within the paradigm of empowerment as identified by the women at EMPOWER.

Final Thoughts:

If research combined with activism (i.e., research for change) is recognized as a worthy goal, then there must be a recognition of the factors involved in conducting research as outlined in Chapter four above. This is applicable whether the research is one of the above outlined projects, or a project more along the lines of the one which I constructed. I do not hold this thesis up as a model for emulation - as individual circumstances in space and time will differ. But, I do think it points to some important considerations for undertaking research with sex workers and to undertaking research within an organizational context. But whether research is for change or not, recognition of power differentials in research and active measures to minimize their impact must

[1] A project like this would need to be done in Thai, or translated into Thai to be useful.

be included in research agendas.

In conclusion, although in this instance, I decided to speak about the making of geography rather than a product of geographical research, I have tried to outline the reasons why consideration of matters of consent, voice and power are important. And although it was not an explication of the research process as originally conceptualized, I tried to point to caveats for future researchers within this specific context. And I have tried to keep the avenues for continued learning and sharing open, even in the face of major concerns and issues with undertaking research with this group of women or in these organizational circumstances.

In this context, it is my hope that the research process will move towards becoming a more equitable one, that will include more description of the process as a reference for other researchers to learn from, a commitment to action and change and most importantly a detailed consideration of the positions and concerns of the participants in the research project.

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*Note: References by Thai authors are listed under their *first* name, following their referencing tradition.

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